Sins of Malisfelt

by
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It is easy to imagine angels and hate them for existing. It is especially easy to imagine beings of light and think they are watching you, following you, judging you.

Sometimes I think the act of judgement is an external act, that no one judges themselves. Rather we are judged and the reflection of this then carries outward as if we were pretending the origin of it, or it pretending the offspring of us.

Sometimes I think we are mirrors being reflected by this external source and the worst punishment imaginable is having this judgement placed at our feet, having to justify every action, every thought, being told without words that somehow you have failed and if you had simply chosen another way all would end well. *If.*

And at the end again it is easy to imagine ourselves placed upon the scales of our deeds and our thoughts and be told we failed and did not do what was expected of us.

In dreams, I have stood in an endless gallery of polished stone the colour of broken skin listening to all the things I'd done in life and told if only, *if only* I had been something else all would be righted then.

In the dark I never see them. Instead, I hear them whisper as if their flesh were whispers, as if their skins were voices.

But when I ask what I should have done, how I should have been they do not answer me. They remain silent in this. I assumed it was because being past salvation I had no right to know. But one night, as I drifted into sleep and came again into the country of no faces I asked, they refused to answer, and I realized finally the truth.

There was no answer.

Had I done everything opposite to what I had done, had I been another man they would have then argued my choices, those

choices made by me were the correct path and were only deemed false steps because I had actually taken them.

In that gallery which stretched forever beside pillars sliding upward against a stone sky, I knew the voices and the whispers existed not because our deeds determine our fate but because the absence of our deeds determine us.

Whatever choice we need not make they claim to be the correct one and so having no way to prove what never was we are left groping in the dark, begging for another chance.

Only that other chance would again be considered an answer they deemed blasphemous.

In that moment of realization, the creatures of light that clustered about me departed going into countries whose angles and dimensions were adjacent and invisible to my own.

I was left alone in that gallery to scrawl snail-wise my own script across the universe.

In awakening, I glanced out the window to the sun.

I smiled as if for the first time in forever.

I rose and dressed and never had such a dream again.

The mirror had been taken out of me. I was black as the void is cold . . .

And I was content.

THE COUNTRY OF NO FACES

1) The invisible man in the desert

There was an invisible man in the desert. Writing.

The book itself was invisible as was the pen and ink. After making his notes he turned from the ocean of heat he stood upon, glancing sideways to the stars.

One would have imagined he would look up but this was not necessary for the desert curved outward so the sky bent at an angle one needed only stare ahead to see above. It was like some illusion that by now the man had grown accustomed to.

By now he should have died from thirst but his body was now a child of air, a simple punishment his captors had designed. He could have walked a time, could have continued walking but in the logic of this world, their mirage countries shimmered and vanished closer one came to them.

For the time he was trapped, with only his words as guide.

He could see the pages, of course, feel their weight. It was deemed too cruel to leave one in the desert by the Void Sea without their own words to give comfort.

So, the man could write and read but only portions of himself he had willed to be more than thought or desire.

His people could have looked for him of course. But the people here would never release a prisoner prematurely. In a sense, he respected their rigidity.

In a sense.

As he stared, he became aware of something in the sands and moving closer realized what it was.

A scorpion.

Not a creature of Earth though. It was something parted and undone. Scorpion, or glass-scorpion, was merely the closest term he had for them.

He watched a tail winnowing along the sands. Just the tail, this small barely translucent piece of flesh. Barb inched forward dragging the rest of it along. The curve of the tail reminded him of the sky and as he watched its segmented body writhe in the heat a time and then became still.

Was it dead?

No.

There crept up from the sand an eye, a small spider-rounded thing with four tendrils descending from itself and the eye crept to the tail, tendrils bore into it and suddenly the whole could see where only the part had seen before.

In the small valley depression of this miracle, legs grew up from the dust attaching themselves, followed by a thick worm of a torso. The arms came last, human-almost-like, ending in two-fingered hands.

Having assembled itself the scorpion stared at him and asked why he was there.

"I have been found guilty," he said simply.

What are you guilty of? the scorpion asked.

So, he began to explain the nature of his crime.

II.

"I am from a far country," he began, "and I and my compatriots arrived here some time ago. We came because the peoples of this world visited our own so we were invited to trade ourselves with them."

We are aware of the true nature of things, the scorpion said. *We know you are a maker of things. You are of the Earth.*

"Quite true." The man sat then, feeling the sand cool to his nonexistent flesh but he still had to possess enough will to *be*. So, he sat and could sit upon the sands.

"So, we came. I will not bore you with the details. We came to the Void Sea at the heart of the continent. We explored

this world's mirror nature. A hand looking for an eye . . ."

The scorpion peered at him strangely.

"One told me how some people like you exist, fragments wandering, blistering together. Couldn't believe it. I suppose the way I'm telling you isn't very clear."

Do you see anything else to do? the scorpion asked.

The man almost laughed.

"No, you're quite right. We did surveys and explorations and we encountered the different peoples of this world and we were shocked by just how many different peoples exist. And somewhere I observed a duel . . ."

The scorpion collectively sighed in understanding.

"We had seen this before back on Earth but those were formalized. The emissaries were, I suppose you could call them professionals. Well, I was in their city and saw this duel take place. Saw the look on her face, saw no lust was there, no thirst for this. Face told the story. Just before the final strike I intervened."

So that is why you are here.

"That's why."

The scorpion pondered this a moment. A few legs crawled away to think in the isolation of the tunnels below the sun-dark world of sand.

You should have known this, the scorpion said, *should have known better.*

"Couldn't help myself," the man said. "It's my nature. When I see someone in trouble I have to intervene."

How long will you remain here?

"I don't know. How long are prisoners normally kept in the sea of sands?"

Time has no meaning to us. We exist now and part soon. When we emerge, again, we will not be this essence. Others will join with us in our communions, others will part from us and we will know them no more. Day and night are not our concerns. Life is measured by only its

being, to us.

"How many lives then would a being have to spend here?"

No more than seventy. No fewer than seven.

The man pondered this. He took up his book and began to write.

What are you writing?

"I am writing the reasons I'm in hell."

Considering the words he stopped.

"No. No," he said quickly, quietly. "I am writing the reasons I left hell and came here. Would you stay with me a time?"

We cannot promise this. But we will send for our kin. They will come and you will not be alone. It would not be right for one to spend their time . . . here.

The man realized "here" was not the desert. To the composite race of the scorpions "here" meant being alone. Had he been placed in the finest palace and they had learned of this and knew he was meant to spend even an hour separate from another they would have come.

Here was anywhere one stood alone.

Taking his pen, feeling the absent weight of it in his nonexistent hand he began, and as he wrote he spoke. As much to himself as to them.

2) The disposable society

"Earth is a world of oceans. They span forever. That drew them to see it.

"Couldn't believe it.

"One day in the middle of the hottest summer I could remember there came a flash in the sky that stretched from the east to the edges of the west. And a procession of figures descended from these ships like great beetles and all they did was

peer at the ocean. You'd see them lined on the beach, these naked people from another planet, waiting. *Staring.* I wasn't there but someone decided to reach out to them and did so by going for a swim.

"And they followed.

"Nothing terrible happened. Just this man and this stranger in the ocean, neither could speak the other's language or knew if they were enemies or friends and just swam in the blue of the water, then came back to shore.

"That was first contact.

"After that, they all swam. On every continent, you'd see them swimming. No armies came, no riots. It was like some strange farce. A flotilla of alien ships arrived on our doorstep because they wanted to touch water. Only after they'd done that did we get to know them.

"Still remember her face. I want to use their pronoun but I just . . . when I hear it it's like a colour I've never seen before. I don't have the reference. Even now, even here I just want to say her. So, I will. I don't think you'd stop me."

He glanced at the scorpion and realized another had crept up and now his audience had doubled.

"So, there was this woman I met, her face this lovely shade of gold and her eyes were cat's eyes, this prism of silver shifting when her head turned.

"I didn't love her. I don't know if she loves me. But in that moment, she was my world. I can't explain it."

Where was this? one of the scorpions asked.

"A small town I grew up in. You wouldn't know the name of it. We had a beach. One day the train came and out of it came this group of seven and she was one of them. Think she had ice cream for the first time.

"Sitting on this wooden bench staring out at the water she's beside me and she starts talking about her home. About how

everything is mirrored there. Didn't know what she meant. I tell her about the town, the way autumn smelled, about winter like some predatory thing. Don't know why but I knew they'd never known winter before. I was the one who told her about the cold.

"Then we swam. Still remember her body floating on the water, the way everything was warm like not yet being born, that moment when everything is comfortable and you're not even sure you exist.

"Then it was over.

"That was my first encounter with the strangers among us.

"Left me feeling like the whole town had shriveled into oblivion. Couldn't stare at my streets anymore knowing there was this place she came from. Place I had to get to.

"So, I did."

He stopped here. He glanced about and sighed as if the words lifted something deep and dark out of him. He then realized night had come.

Hadn't noticed it.

Then he considered her luminous eyes staring at him in the dark that first night he had come here, green pale blue eyes . . .

Without knowing it he slept.

His mind slipped to oblivion and he fell backward upon the sands, two scorpions watching so close together it was as if they were holding hands . . .

II.

Autumn came to town.

The man had a name. One seldom exists without such a thing but until that moment his name had left him. It was a trick of the punishment they laid upon him. In the desert, he was sans body, sans weight, and sans name. The last detail even he was not aware of and would not be aware of until they came for him.

Absent his name in the world of waking eyes it now only

lingered in dreams. Here in the town of dreams, he was Roydon though his friends still called him Owlsey.

The name came about this way.

One autumn evening, just before frost fell, he and his friends had gone into the woods to get drunk. They were barely sixteen and being drunk was as a good reason as any to exist in those days.

His friends sat by the fire which had seemingly come from nowhere with the forests scattered behind them like giants waiting to be born, and there was Roydon, taking a swig of it, feeling the bitter heat rise in his guts as he stared out over the darkness beyond, claiming he could see.

"I can see," he says, still reeling from the first taste of that bitter fire, "that tree, the one Maryan used to carve her initials in."

"You liar," Bertram says, gold-haired Bertram the girls used to love right up until the day he shot himself in his family home, after Lucy's death, "can't see that tree from here."

"But I do," at this the words slurring since he has taken two, three more, and being young they had chosen the strongest poison they could, making every mouthful a multitude and every intoxication an hour slipping into a century, "with your name just below hers and his and his and his," Maryan was quite popular in those days before she settled for that accountant whose name no one could remember, "and you are there and I can see the bark of the tree burning in the cold."

The others laugh, Roydon again trying to be poetic, even drunk, and knowing his name had never been added to that tree one or two of them, Phillip perhaps, surmised maybe he could only really "see it" because he wished he could and yet knew if he really could he'd just see his name was never there.

But Roydon continues, the others humouring him.

By midnight most leave, leaving Bertram and Roydon to sit and think. But the way is too long and the others returned.

For some reason, perhaps being drunk out of their minds the forests become a circular labyrinth leading only back the way they came.

At this, he staggers up. It's hard to explain the rough geography of a man standing up who feels the world's foundations have shifted and broken free, but he does, and having nothing better to do staggers forward carrying them in the train of his actions as during the next hour he claims to see the road and their homes and their mothers screaming at their fathers and their fathers making love to their mistresses, those wealthy enough to have them, and the fathers who aren't so fortunate who make do simply with their wives, but after the hours, despite being in the dark with no light save a moon's black eye, he leads them out.

It is as if he has owl's eyes that night. Name stuck.

Autumn of course passed to winter, giants waiting to be born who grew thin and faminelike and starved, buried in oceans of grave white snow.

Name stuck.

Roydon eventually got tired of the nights in the woods, all of them but Phillip and Lewis who eventually got married to one another when Phil was twenty-seven and Lewis twenty-four.

The others though got tired, went home to their girlfriends whose names they sometimes wanted to forget, couldn't, and eventually each awoke into their self-appointed lives to be bankers, lawyers, drifters, frauds.

But always they remained in the circumscribed boundaries of their small private universe as if Earth were nothing but a single town occupying a single clutch of ground no wider than a man's vision at midday.

And then they came.

And then she came.

And after that, he couldn't get away fast enough, even to the ends of the Earth. And beyond.

He left on a summer day.

III.

The invisible man was teaching philosophy, having awoken some hours before.

The scorpions had shifted in that time, tails switched places and a third scorpion had come missing four legs so far. But in another hour these absent places might be filled.

One only needed patience and time.

"Plato," he began, "believed all things were the shadows of other forms. When one saw a tree it was not the true tree, merely a piece of it. There lay elsewhere another tree, a perfect representation of everything this shadow represented."

What is a tree? one of the scorpions asked.

"It is a plant," he began, then noticing the scorpions in communion had to clarify, "but not like the plants here. Here the plants move and hunt, stalk the ground, and feed. In my world plants remain stationary. They cannot hunt, except rarely, and never by seeking out what they would kill."

They sound boring. Do they sing or speak?

"No, they are not like the cthraelisthria," he spoke the name slowly, trying to make certain each syllable was exact, "and do not sing nor speak. They have no minds to do such things."

He moved on by tracing a tree upon the ground, his finger only half-existing and so doubling his efforts to make the branches felt, the leaves seen. When finished though the scorpions crossed the threshold of his shadow-creation, half-satisfied.

"Plato believed somewhere was a perfect tree exemplifying all trees. The father of trees, the mother, the progenitor though it had no will of its own."

Is there then a perfect human being of which you are but the shadow?

"I do not think so."

He continued then moving backward to Socrates who feared books would doom mankind to forgetfulness then to Omar Khayyam and his sacred mathematics before the coming of horse beats across the sands . . .

Is there a reason for this? a scorpion asked.

"I wish to keep myself sane. If I can retrace what we were I can be certain we will be."

Poetic.

"My vice."

The scorpions discussed this concept for a moment.

What is vice?

"It is whatever makes us less than we could be."

They talked a bit longer about vices. He explained Macbeth and Lear, took a detour into the deathless fate of Tithonus and the ruin of Sisupala, and all the time the scorpions gave stories of their own.

They spoke of tails and eyes and hands and legs and torsos writhing across the sands. They spoke of those times an eye had crawled upon a tlylamir and added something into them or when a miniature hand had entered into the orgies of the hlalymir, skin rough with their scent of lust.

They had no names of course since to name a thing was to limit it. And they had no limitations.

They laid bare a history of forever through the curtains of an afternoon, each hour closing softly as if it darkened with the coming of dusk.

Was that his way of thinking, or theirs? He could not say.

The man listened contentedly.

The scorpions again asked him about what vices were.

"Imagine a man," he began, "and this man loves something or someone. He lays out his hand and where his hand touches her has found paradise. He would give everything just to be with her again. Even at the cost of himself.

"Imagine another man who does not love. He cannot feel. He does not touch anything and nothing touches him. This second man would not sacrifice anything. He lacks the will to do so.

"A vice is when something is taken to excess or not taken enough. It is a weakness. That is why it is feared."

Are words to be feared then? Can words be feared?

"It is not the words but how they are said."

At this the scorpions and he retired, night having come on thick fingers or thin, and though he could still see them in the dark pretended not to.

They too pretended he was not there but they did not leave him. So, the small community remained, each aware of the other, each left to themselves, each under the illusion they could not see, each seeing the other clearly.

IV.

"What's happening?"

The train came whistling from the east, this lone dragon composed of bones not yet buried and Roydon was standing on the hill watching it winnow its way toward him.

Trains were nothing special, rivers of steel moving their circular paths between towns but for some reason he asked, Bertram answering only with the word, "strangers," there on the hill green as the emerald in Maryan's wedding ring.

The cicadas were singing below.

Roydon could hear rattling in their nonexistent bones, the way they shifted sound of metal into skin, vibrating like unfelt winds in deserts.

At the word the pair of them went down, the whole country shifting in their perceptions. It seemed at first the town was this pool of cement and they cement walkers whose footfalls would crush a continent. You could see John's Pharmacy beside the bank where Phillip would go into and become manager ten

years from now.

You could see the red brick of the old buildings seep into their foundations like dough cracked backward into flour and notice the square cages of everyone's homes, so like each other, chess squares waiting for the occupancies of rooks and kings.

But with each step buildings grew walls, streets grew taunt and slender like corset wires his mother wore, hoping no one noticed, and so in time the walls became these titans shifting over them with each step as if the buildings walked to them and they remained quite still, their feet suspended in the air, never able to move forward or anywhere at all.

Finally, the town became the chrysalis of what it had been before he climbed the hill, his memories of the morning sliding into his perceptions of the afternoon.

So, they came, passing red bright brick dough houses, coming to the railway station not even still knowing why. Bertram said the word but if asked he wouldn't answer how he knew. Had his father mentioned it? His mother?

Some things once known can never be lost but how they are known is impossible to remember afterward.

They came out tumbling bones of the dragon; they came.

They were naked, or seemed so, but no. At a distance she was naked, golden body shimmering forward, all others lost in his glances as she remained pure and defined, but closer he saw more fully he realized she was clothed, but only if seen fully.

It was a trick of their lusts, a preacher would say, though no one would come to that sermon and after an hour he would get quite drunk on the wine and leave the church and shut its doors and go outside and listen to the birds sing a time. Never listen to the birds when you are too drunk or sad though.

They might start making sense . . .

It was explained the strangers' garments were designed to make them appear quite naked unless you were looking at them.

Carefully.

This way one could be sure they found you attractive enough to focus upon since if the edges of your sight could hold any view of any lovely thing why look anywhere at all? One could spend their days glancing at the edges of nothing hoping for a glimpse of something beautiful-profane.

If instead you saw her and kept looking and wanting to see more even knowing the more you saw the more you were denied this made the object of your glances worthy of your full attention.

Or so they claimed.

In those days they could just as easily have been lying or perhaps the truth was this, for some. Is there ever anything that only has a single truth attached to it?

Still, he saw her, said his name, noticed her cat's eyes glinting silver in the light and later they would go to the wharf by the edges of the city and strip naked for real and lay in the body of the water and forget they ever were.

Bertram would find another, and another, and another and they would spend the night in an orgy which even De Sade might find a tad bizarre.

But Lucy was still alive in those days and he was happy and the strangers marvelled at his strength and applauded the attempt even though he only lasted half the night.

In his home where he invited them later one of them would ask about the portrait on the mantlepiece of his mother and his father and himself and Lucy, and of their happiness in this picture.

And he would explain how important family is to them and the hlalymir would nod or do something Bertram would understand as a nod and say it was well and good and proper to be alive in such interesting times.

Or words to that effect.

3) The church of the imperfect ones

"What are they do you think?"

Roydon is listening to scientists. He will not remember their names or even their faces a year from now. He will only remember what they say.

"Biologically they appear human," Scientist One is saying, "but the reality is much deeper."

Roydon is sitting and having a sandwich. He remembers this, taste of meat without being aware of what kind of meat it is. He stares out the window, sees Maryan kissing another man she will eventually marry, and realizes the voices are coming from the far wall. The screen is there, the door to another place halfway across the world. If he simply tilts his head at just the right angle, he will see them sitting around a round table chatting amiably about the nuances of a species that did not exist as anything but myth half a year ago.

It will be another half-year until Arl comes into his sight. For now, the strangers are, to his mind at least, still only creatures of myth.

"How so?" Scientist Two asks. Of course, the nature of the program is pure exposition. They exist merely to reveal their relevance by laying out small details that may or may not become relevant later and after it will be like they never were.

Life could be distilled to less.

"We have here," Scientist One continues, "the hallmark of convergent evolution. On their planet, there are no mammals as we have here and they are not defined by gender as we are defined . . ."

"Fascinating," Scientist Two intones as if it truly is.

". . . rather they are closer to worms or snails. Imagine a snail given a human face, arms, and legs but still at heart as

different from us as we are those things devouring our gardens."

"The question," Scientist Two asks, "is are they a threat to us?"

"A threat is nothing more than danger. Everything can be a danger. Too much water, too much sun, too much food. No, no, the question of these visitors is not are they are a threat, it is this. How will they affect us? How will we affect them? In a century will it be so strange to imagine a snail walking on two legs? In a century where they come from will it be so strange to be simply a woman or a man?"

"There is also the question of culture of course."

"Of course."

"How will culture be affected?"

Roydon is still listening but only vaguely. Something important is said but he doesn't remember it. Instead, he notices Maryan and her silk-red hair shaking as she kisses him there on the street with the green fields of the public park behind them.

It's almost like a picture someone would take. Something worthy of being remembered . . .

II.

Today he decided to go mad.

He put the book carefully down and howled for fifteen minutes straight. Had he knowledge of time he would have been able to discern this fact.

He stared at the desert he could only partly touch and screamed his curse at it.

He wept.

He wanted to kill the scorpions or tear at them but such was the nature of his punishment he could not. Nothing of life could be truly held. And the scorpions knew this.

He felt the weight of the sky for a moment.

He hadn't felt it before, strumming along his sanity with

the names of people who, if they had lived had died long before his people were born. He hadn't felt it before, that sky baring down upon him until this moment, when, having exhausted all the stories save the most important, exhausted all the little philosophies or faiths was left with nothing else to say. Or do. Or be.

They were never coming. He would sit here and wait and they would never come. He would wait until his town were bones and the continents of home a graveyard, and still they would not come to him. For his crime.

His howl ceased.

His crime.

He had begun to speak of it, write of it, but had stalled. The scorpions knew this, being the composite of many minds and so adept at both insanity and forbearance. They knew the labyrinths of unsaid words, that patience would seep through like rivulets of mercury seeping into the crypts of kings.

They waited till he was spent of his madness then asked of his crime again.

They knew of course. They knew the crime itself, he mentioning the duel, but outlaying this crime was a maze of actions and reactions, little thoughts and little failings and he having spent himself of his philosophies was left with this which he had left unexamined to its fullest extent.

Now, speak further of the crime.

Grounded in the rational of his hell, in the knowledge of why he was here he stilled. Still there remained beneath his skin was the bursting beast, about to pour forth like a storm.

There was an ocean, a scorpion said. *And her. What happened after the passing of her from your sight?*

"I left the town and never looked back. I had to go where she was. Had to come here."

Two lives have passed in the night. Two more the night before.

They have not abandoned you this fate. They would not be so cruel as to give you eternal life without hunger, thirst, or peace. They lack the imagination to be cruel. Take comfort in not truly being here. Speak. Pick up your book and write. We are eternally old and we endure. Can you not do more than us? Is there nothing more to you than the howl?

Taunted by these words he sprang to being again, took up the book, pen scrawled uselessly by his left hand, and spoke again. Having spent time on his philosophies, all save his own, he had imagined this would keep him whole.

But he had not described himself. Not truly. Not yet.

He took up his pen again and began to write.

"I left the town," he said. "I was going north."

III.

Two races had come. The tlylamir were one and the hlalymir the other. Roydon had only encountered the hlalymir. But even after knowing there was one more alien race, this did not prepare him for knowing there was more than one.

Their planet had many names of course. It would be as foolish to imagine different species would name all things the same as to imagine the peoples of all countries would name themselves the same.

To some, their world was Irenmyir, to others it was Hliarth. To others it was Tlyyalis. But to Arl's people, it was known as Malisfelt.

The pun was not lost to those of Earth.

When it was explained to them that malice-felt implied violence or the intention to cause harm they found it incredibly amusing. This was because to Arl's people Earth was another term for fucking. When a human said they were of the Earth it implied they were creatures of lust obsessed only with the act of taking another being to the edge of climax and then beyond it.

This had enamoured Arl's people.

As for the tlylamir Earth was nonsense and meant nothing of any importance at all.

But. To realize that each of those names was not used by a nation or a culture but a different species, to realize that Irenmyir and Hliarth and Tlyyalis and Malisfelt was peopled by four sentient species or more. This was more surprising.

When Roydon went in search of Arl, having sold his meager possessions, having told his parents the lie of simply seeking a job elsewhere, after having gone to Bertram's grave to say goodbye he turned his eyes northward and after this, it was as if he never was.

It was as if he'd never lived in the town at all, the town which had only one name and only one kind of people living in it, people who set their tables before going to bed and scheduled their lovemaking the way a clock would schedule an hour, thinking no more of it than that it was and that it was usually unsatisfying.

He turned north.

"You'd see trees on every side and leaves this shade of green that used to make me think of something Ms. Palmer said. She said the first leaves in the world never rotted, that the fungi didn't exist to devour them so if you dug far enough you could still find the first flowers buried under the earth, waiting to be born.

"Arl told me where she lived. They had small sections of various larger cities cordoned off, for the moment.

"Had to acclimate to the nature of things.

"Don't know why I went. She didn't know I was coming. But I did. Went to the city and saw her on the street corner eating this sandwich. It was so hot out that the sun seemed to stare down at me directly and made trees shimmer heat.

"Went to her and said hi. She said hi. Wasn't surprised to see me. I wasn't surprised she would be seen by me. Should have

done more but we just talked. Wanted to hold her hand. Almost did. Later the others came and I sat outside listening to them having sex in the upper room, I was out on the bench, eyes closed.

"What do you want from me?"

Are you asking us?

"She asked me afterward, coming down the stairs, smelling of something I didn't know was lust. Kissed her. My answer. Her question asked was stilled, stopped, and died. Two years later I arrived here, into this."

The man stopped, stilled himself, and gazed at the desert. He was in one of the low countries. He could tell that. The Void Sea was somewhere to the west. Arl was north in Ulsaires. His captors were north also. He had gone that way once before and when he went that way, he'd see her again, hopefully.

Or if not her he'd never see anyone at all.

If given skin he'd slit his wrists, oblivion preferable to this.

II.

The following day he laid bare the town.

He scrawled along the desert his home, each street carefully arranged. He placed the library atop a dune and put his parent's home in the shadow of sand. He put Bertram's grave at the scorpion's feet and the spire of the church his slender pen invisibly casting its shadow over everything else besides.

But with the town laid out there was some new angle to the piece and the scorpions could see through his eyes that the lines upon the sands were more than lines upon the sand.

They saw that this line was a street and could feel the cement blister on a summer day. Over here the spire loomed, this white finger of wood and wire and nails echoing the sound of bells. They even heard the bells.

And here was Bertram's grave . . .

Who was he?

"My friend. More than that. Loved him like a brother. Died before I left."

They could see the pistol then, lying uselessly in his hand, Bertram's body cast on the floor just before the door leading outside, his entire frame nothing more than a few grains of sand now, his ancestral home a crude square cut into half a dune.

Lucy?

"Yes. Lucy."

Her grave was placed beside Bertram's own. He wanted to say everything then, to explain her in the machinery of him, how when she passed beyond Bertram felt those thin threads coming, pulling him to go wherever she went even as the place was going away.

That place was of course his memory of her.

Even then when the bullet was put to his head, he imagined Bertram was slowly slipping away with the shadow of her eyes fading, the contour of her smile melting like ice on a summer's eye, the feel of her hand going into oblivion and the longer he remained in the living world the faster she would elude his grasp till there would come the day Bertram would look back upon her and not even remember her face.

The bullet came swift and smooth and mild as fire-eating bones. Bertram strode back to the moment when he could still know her as if she were alive and at this moment ended self.

He would not let Lucy be left behind.

Beyond this, the invisible man would not say. She could have been some incestuous love, a sister too intimate her gaze, or a lover or some older woman whose husband perished. Or the love of Bertram's was indeed nothing more than a brother's love for his sister or a friend's love broken and ashen-turned in the sepulcher of his companion, but never broken. Not truly.

Not until the bullet came.

He would not say more. He would not let the scorpions

touch this hidden machinery of Bertram's passing into the long dark.

They did not pry.

It did not matter.

Whoever she was it was not at issue here. It was only that Bertram saw in her his everything and in her passing his everything passed too. Beyond this, the enigma could only be solved by the dead man lying on the floor with the door leading outside cracked open only enough to let a sliver of the sun shine forth and bleed into his still-opened, blank eyes.

They turned to gaze further upon the town and the shadows dwelling within it.

"Plato argued that there was only one true thing in existence, one perfect example of everything. Beyond this all else were shadows."

Where had he first heard those words?

He was at the university, this crude half-moon positioned along the edge of this rough geography, and Professor Arlder was speaking his lecture then.

The man was sitting in the third row just behind Lucy with the window leading to the outside to his left at the far end of a wall he could not touch.

The Professor looked so incredibly old then, this bland and balding bundle of twigs locked in a suit of black, his spectacles like the twin stars of some unknown constellation.

He was the one who mentioned Plato and the City of God and the ship of Theseus and the man realized the lectures bled together. An autumn was reduced to a moment and a billion words condensed to a few snippets of an old man's stories as if that was all he was.

The scorpions laughed then, this shrill metallic sound, and the man was drawn from his revery. Of course. Ship of Theseus. Were they not proof of that very idea? Perhaps there was just one

scorpion in the desert, a creature so vast as to dwarf all the countries beside the Void Sea and the man was seeing only the smallest part, a second in an hour so elongated as to seem an hour itself.

The scorpions laughed then, this shrill metallic sound, and he imagined the sound crept and came from all corners of the world equally, as if the farce had spread and brought a certain wonder to alien minds. Not because the idea was wrong but because it was such a simply understood thing as if all were together in some communion of the true mind which is neither alien nor familiar but both.

So long as both are kind.

He continued to listen to the lecture now. He was there in that white room, the balding man at the front discussing the dead, Lucy before him, Bertram beside her and Lucy could have been whatever he described her to be, blond or red or dark with eyes of green or sapphire or jasmine-white.

Had he loved her?

No. The man knew that the reason in that moment she could be all women was because she was no woman to him but just another face, another body in this flesh of a moment listening to Arlder describe something some Argentine writer had said about a place called Tlon.

"If one can imagine a thing to be at a certain point it must be, based only upon the scaffolding of that belief."

Or words to that effect.

The sun set, two suns, one in his memory and one in the world of the sands and he saw the spires in the distance finally. Walking toward him.

They undulated, those bronze gods. He knew then where he was. He was in Izyalia, somewhere the maps don't show. There was comfort then in knowing the name, knowing he could cage the desert behind a few syllables as if in naming this he could

collapse the ground to something one could put in the palm of a bleeding hand.

If the bronze titan-spires were seen then the tlylamir wished them to be seen. At that moment he fell, his knees half-sinking to the sand as if he was almost really there.

The town lay at his feet, Bertram's grave beyond the edge of his left hand, as the tears started to fall. The people of Izyalia were not tlylamir themselves, those stranger people in their towers of bronze.

But if he could see the towers then the veil was being lifted. As night crept on with slender fingers or thick he felt himself fall, face first, his body just outside the circle of the town, his mind still listening to the ship of Theseus crossing those ancient wine-dark waters as the sails were shifted and replaced, the skin torn up and her wounds healed with new skin until the remnants of herself lay scattered in her wake, bits of twine or canvas left tattered behind while the new self, sailed on.

Oblivious to her future fate.

4) Martian summer

There was a garden on Mars.

The cthraelisthria had made it, those daughters of Izyalia. They had not bothered with the Earth. They had glanced at the Jovian moons, Europa especially, and had bled a taste of Enceladus, a touch of Titan and its hydrocarbon seas, but Mars remained their favourite aspect of a maker's thing.

Maker.

That was their word for his kind.

At first, he hadn't understood that.

"Why maker?" he asked Arl that night after they had fucked in the dark with the others, he still on the knife's edge of uncertainty where Bertram had plunged in, listening to the

sounds of them entering and exiting each other as if each were a house briefly occupied by some stranger and then abandoned in the cruel cold light of day.

"Is that not what you are?"

They were in the park, the apartment behind him like a red brick statue of some blunt political animal playing at being oblivious, in order to hide the beasts within.

"You are creatures of the making. You see before you, ah," she picked up a stick from the serpent grass, "and you say this is not a stick, it is an arm. And you reach out with this arm and touch something and what you touch is not the bark of that tree but a wall or a chair, something that does not exist yet, except," and she places a finger on the side of his head, "here. Are you not makers then?"

"You do the same. You create."

"Creating is not the same as making."

He said it was. She said it wasn't.

They argued then, he explaining that the words were interchangeable and she explaining in her language they were not interchangeable at all.

And all the time there was a garden built on Mars.

The cthraelisthria were plants given shapes of women, trees of some myth who gave birth to bodies of women as their seeds. One would cultivate the cancerous soil, allow herself to be infected and corrupted. The black obelisk orchids which they tended to grew strangely squat and stunted here and they marvelled at their mutations, indulging their self-violence all the time.

The garden began in the shadow of Olympus Mons then moved outward, at first black stains followed by a deeper red followed by a deeper emerald.

The women tending the poisoned ground succumbed of

course. Even though the air was being made for life each cupful of soil was a tumor riddling its way throughout their bodies there.

They reveled in this.

For the garden was built of bodies.

When one of them succumbed too much to the infection she fell, cancer bursting like black wounds from an over-ripened mandrake root screaming manlike as it was torn from out the ground.

But after this, the birthing began.

For they could only give birth in death. They could only create in the absences of themselves.

As one fell, she was embraced by the ground. Her violated flesh burst, and out fell uncounted spore-children by a bewildered mother who further fell in the corrupted soil and rooted, barnacles encased in shells of skin covered in fingers of ice seeking to be shattered in another's company.

But they were invisible at first, glass seeds floating no larger than half a grain of sand.

Once rooted they grew, breaking-broken in the quick poison of their home. By the time they were old enough to step some had no legs to do it with.

By the time some had eyes and could see the black obelisk orchids wilting in the iridescent sunsets of black rainbows it was clear some would only see the black.

But this did not matter to them.

Mars grew black then bright green then colours only the cthraelisthria knew, colours no human tongue could pronounce or human eye could see before the lost geography of a continent whose borders man could not understand.

The closest to the truth came when one used wasp's eyes, letting myriad colours shift sideways to new oblivions, new births.

By the tenth generation, the violations had run their course.

There emerged a new species of the daughters of a myth, there riddled along the sands legs like metallic spines ripping at sunsets only they could see. Their mouths divorced themselves, splitting sideways.

Cancer bled out of them as new forms came, spurred by the desire to follow an as-yet-unknown path of a circular labyrinth.

Had a human asked them why they had willingly broken themselves, had died to make a dead world live they would have looked at the man as a lunatic who escaped an asylum, suddenly freed in an empty field of green serpent grass, and flowers sighing.

"What we have done is us," the woman would say. "We have grasped the world and it is ours, that which we have created. We have created *us*."

In this moment the logic of their minds ran and was revealed. The cthraelisthria perceived whatever was beyond their immediate self as still being their eternal self. The stranger from Earth was not looking at a woman with spines for legs and two mouths smiling, he was seeing the merest fragment of a galaxy, the endpoint of a blazing fire that snaked backward to their planet of origin and further back, into myth, legend, godhood.

For the woman was not a woman. She was an instrument strummed upon by herself, this self which lay in all their bodies and in all their minds.

Had she carved a flute it would be made from the bones of her own mothers, had she made a blade it would have been forged from the skin of her ancestors.

Those peoples of Malisfelt could not make a thing for to them to make meant transform one thing to another.

Instead, they created. But the word "create" did not mean to make. It was a word of reincarnation. Each generation was the creation of its own past, therefore each thing from orchid to ship

to city was not a thing transformed but avatar of what was before itself reclaimed.

One did not see a woman born upon the branches of a tree, a meager fragment lost in the dark and cast upon cancerous roots of a foreign shore.

Instead, one saw the infinite behind her.

One simply saw the tree.

III.

The man awoke to the sound of masks being worn.

Far away perception shifted and telescoped backward into his sight.

He saw the tower and atop it the duelists. Dueling.

One was a tall androgynously thin creature with shoulders like a young girl's and a cruel mouth like an old man's whose life was spent wasted on anything but himself.

The other was older, thicker, limbs shortened by a year, and the spur on the right hand poised above the head.

The man awoke to the sounds of masks being worn.

Seeing them he knew the time was crouching near when he would be freed to flesh again.

And Arl was there.

Her skin erupted then. Shades of deepest malachite green bled through turning her face to a jungle canopy sliced upon an almost human skin. He imagined he saw a jaguar crawling along her skin, mottled spots of black rippling in her absence of a smile.

As for the other the hint of hunted gazelle eyes scrawled along a cheek, waiting to be found, and destroyed.

This was for his benefit, this murder in miniature. He reached out a hand impossible to touch, divorced by miles, and fell, his eyes still staring dead.

The spur came. Then there was a moan, not the victim's

but the victor's spasm as a final act completed itself and was done.

And all the time flashes of the deepest black and ice wine blue shot across their features. Zaiha and xoiol. These had no equivalency in human tongue. Zaiha first.

The deep black in rivulets would ripple across a face, not black the way skin on a man is black nor the animal black of the fur of a bear nesting in a cave. This black was void like the Void Sea, this black so deep one could stare into it and see forever as if the person were not a person but the edges of a lost galaxy, splintering of stars lost in such a perfect night as to be unseen.

The meaning?

If a tlylamir saw in you some source of attraction the duellist would argue zaiha had come to her. (Her. It could be the closest term a human would understand for now.) But attraction meant something adjacent to a human mind.

It did not simply mean the desire of lust as the hlalymir desired. It meant you were so beautiful that the tlylamir would seek to fight you, to grapple and to thrust her spur, this dagger into you with such force as to collapse a lung. And after this the offspring would be implanted, small nodules in the distortion of the blood and the wire of your nerves, tumors seeking comfort and shelter beneath your very skin.

Then four seasons later as a man would measure time, they would come from out your body, mouths, and maws with teeth daggerlike chewing bones away, devouring muscles of your heart, slowly, slowly, an inch at a time a day at a time until they were freed, leaving you a husk-corpse on your last, pitiable day.

Zaiha was lust coupled by the utter annihilation of the desired. It was beyond hatred or envy or scorn. They did not hate you after all, they were not angry with you or felt in you some negative thing.

Nor was it love.

It was the utter conviction of your destruction because you

were so beautiful it was their utter honour to *be* your destruction. Hatred did not emerge in this. There was nothing in this a human could truly understand. A slow death would occur merely because of your beauty. Most sought to be the object of another's zaiha. To not be would make them an object of xoiol.

Consider if instead of a deep black there crept the fingers of blue across the myriad shade of a face. This was xoiol which meant you were so unattractive, so unimpressive as to not be worthy of the duel.

It was not scorn nor disgust but a realization the individual was so unremarkable their destruction was unwarranted and to attempt a duel against them a wasted effort.

To be considered this, to be thought of as this was below hatred since even to be hated is to be.

Xoiol was the term reserved for the undeserving.

The duel ended. The victor would now have to tend to the victim until the day of her devouring. Afterward, the victor would raise the seven daughters as her own.

Daughters. Her. Mother. All wrong terms, wrong words. He imagined them as she but none of them truly were. It was another word, the word he was only grasping now.

They reached the edge of their own small secluded upper world and fell.

They slowly walked the sky downward, a step at a time, all the lust in creation dissolved in the thought of spending time only with what you believed you loved.

Leaving Arl atop the spire slowly coming toward him then.

Or words to that effect.

IV.

Summer came.

Mars came into summer for the first true time in forever.

Seasons had existed before but this was summer. The gardens greened cancerously and there swam dragonflies the colour of wasp wine, furtively hunting the leaf eaters who would devour the women a mouthful at a time.

Why were there always predators of everything?

The dragonflies devoured the leaf eaters, those spindling beasts on their ten legs. The leaf eaters ate the black obelisk orchids as they lazily lay in the sun. The orchids devoured the soil, and the air, as if in drinking the air they slowly poisoned the sky back to life.

And what did the sky drink of?

It devoured the sun's light of course, as if the sun had inversed to a small candle left naked in an empty plain and all the world gazed and hungrily took portions of it, though the sun was never filled nor fell nor hollowed out, leaving it exactly as it always was.

And what did the sun prey upon?

It preyed upon everything it had ever made, wilting a black obelisk orchid into a wasted stain of pitch.

Teeth always turned backward against themselves in time.

Martian summer could give birth to Martian autumn and that in turn to Martian winter. Had no seed stepped upon the planet death would not have followed to take dominion of everything, though death itself was nothing but the prey of what came after. Death was only a memory placed in future tense.

Summer came then. Then came laughter.

5) Secrets cruelly taught

The spires walked.
Had no legs.
Nor limbs moved.
No mind thought.

Still, they moved.

They were the product of a tree's mind and in a tree's thoughts spires remained stationary, all things moving about them including the ground of which they were a part. The earth was not their territory, just another active audience with themselves the centre of everything, a sun whose orbit included all things not the sun.

But when they developed their technologies and voyaged abroad the universe, they realized they were not the centre of anything, just a further piece of nothing, so tiny and inconsequential as to barely be seen at all.

As such the cities move because it provides the illusion the world with it moves as well, one planet's orbit eclipsed by another with themselves still the centre. The ground would only go to where their feet laid claim and cities would only enter the grooves their steps laid. It was as if Malisfelt did not exist outside the orbits of their circuits that they and their cities made.

But not today.

II.

Duels on Earth were formal affairs, which meant they were designed to be seen and understood by the audience only.

The tlylamir understood humans did not understand zaiha and xoiol. The tlylamir themselves lacked the understanding of hate. There were murderers of course in places like Mairoptis but even here murder was not the human shape of the thing.

If one desired something another had, wealth or power then the duel was enough. Desire took on any form if one wished it enough and in killing a rival one added to oneself.

If instead, one hated enough, if one wished to kill sans spur there were weapons of course but at a certain point hatred always bled back into xoiol and at that point, no weapon was needed so the murder was avoided by finding the logic of the

crime as flawed.

To explain this discrepancy duels happened where humans could see and human murderers were studied like moths under glass. You'd find a tlylamir making a census of monsters, quantifying their crimes, selecting them into the appropriate tile of the mosaic of the human unbalanced mind.

So, the duels happened in counterpoint to their seeking something human in grey spaces and cages where extraordinary monsters were.

Roydon had seen a duel beneath his apartment window on a day when the heat had devoured everything close to his heart. It was that kind of day when the body leaves itself a cocoon of wilting limbs slumping forward or back on legs melted to the floor.

The two tlylamir below had a wider audience than him. They took position, spurs out and he could see their daggerlike quality, designed to give and take life with equal measure.

They wore the same expressions but they were not true. The tlylamir were on display after all. This would be the same as lovers playing at the act of lovemaking before an audience of ignorant children. There would be an awkwardness in truly giving in to one's desires before such an uncomprehending mass as if they were watching a new colour be born and cannot yet describe it.

This was theatre, the emotions painted on, a thin-skinned mask overlaying their features to show what would be the proper way to be.

The duel was formal to the tiniest degree, move and countermove, one thrusting and the other blocking, moving her arm to take the stab, her arm protected by the leather armour of a sand whale hunter. It thickened so tightly it was the consistency of steel. The other winced in pain.

Lasting more than ten minutes the duel ended, one side

pretending to win. The crowds moved on, a few stragglers asking details only the curious or the depraved truly wished to know.

Or is there a difference between curiosity and depravity?

"What did you think?" Arl asked, sliding behind him, her face unseen but still felt by him.

"I think it's a bad way to love."

"It's not about love," she said, coming forward, staring directly into his eyes, "it's about being seen. And seeing. Everything else is just a mask."

He never understood that statement. Afterward, eight hlalymir quietly in the dark made love. The ninth was a human who was only focused on Arl. The others wondered if there was some sickness claiming him. Later one would say perhaps he was simply too weak to indulge more than one at a time. It was a common weakness they found.

To be human seemed to mean one was incapable of doing everything a normal person should.

III.

In the distance he felt it slowly approach. There came from the edges of the wasteland the sound of their footfalls, slowly.

He rose without knowing he had done so.

The scorpions in concert with themselves laid bare a symphony upon the air, an endless stream of words strumming themselves into more, less, more.

The titan came to him, bronze greying into black, then gold, undulating bronze god limbless as a tree extending her arms ever upward to the farthest stars.

He rose then.

He rose upward into the air glancing sideways to the sky then sideways to its opposite.

There across the Void Sea, he saw it.

The world of Malisfelt was mirrored, her single continent

split and equalled perfectly so that if one stood in Ulsaires there was an identical land spiralling against that farther shore crouching in sympathy with itself.

There across the Void Sea, he saw himself rising, half a man left as a remnant in two places at once, experiencing the same half-state. The names differed of course and the woman upon that other spire was not Arl. Arl was here. But whoever the other was, she wore the mask of the woman he knew, the thin skin mask so perfectly arranged it would be ever so easy to mistake one for the other.

He rose and felt the other him reach out, almost as if trying to hold hands.

And in that moment, it didn't matter he had suffered here in the sands with only the fragmented god for comfort and company.

As her hand reached into his the other him there across the Void Sea dissolved and was gone.

"It is over," someone said. He was uncertain as to who.

Flesh slipped over him, making himself anew.

Into her arms, he came to be.

Oblivion took him then.

6) Winter worm, summer grass

"Owlsey, what are you doing here?"

"Am I asleep?"

"Of course you are. Now why are you here?"

They were in the woods. There was the fire and he was sitting at one end of it and Bertram at the other.

"I was . . . in a city walking toward a place."

"Yes. I imagine so."

"Chlia. Maybe it was called Chlia. I don't remember anymore."

"So why are you here?"

"I'm picking up pieces of who I used to be."

"And before that?"

"I wasn't who I was supposed to be."

"Curious," and here Bertram poked a stick in the fire, Owlsey feeling the heat of it pouring along the etchings of his face, "how no one is exactly who they're supposed to be. Take me. I was supposed to go off among the stars. Never did."

"That tends to happen when you die."

"True. Thought about Lucy and . . . couldn't take it."

"So why are you here?" Owlsey asked. "If this is a dream it feels too real."

"Suppose I'm here to see those stars," he glanced up and Owlsey's eyes followed, "you know I would have never gotten tired of seeing those stars."

They weren't the stars of Earth being infinitely brighter. The planet of the hlalymir and tlylamir was in a section of space littered with more brilliance than Earth's meaning the night sky was a mosaic of light. Added to this were the many moons of the planet and added to this the system of rings and the fire seemed nothing more than just another star that had fallen, coming too close an Earth.

"What are they called anyway?"

"The stars? I couldn't say."

"How about the moons?"

"Sthrairya, and Xerzura and Ayrielis. Hlyargarith is there. I suppose though I might have just described the same moon four times. Everyone has their own name for everything."

They were silent a time.

He knew now he was the sliver of something remaining in the world above the country of the dead. And his friend a child of that country below all the worlds' dark skins . . .

"She's going to die," Owlsey said at last.

"She was going to die before and you stopped it. Care to stop it again?"

"I don't know if I can. I'm a stranger in a strange land."

"Nonsense," Bertram said. "There's no such thing as a stranger in a strange land. There are just people who haven't understood the place they're in yet. But what do I know? I'm not really here."

Talking for a time before the fire they mentioned Lucy and Arl and Bertram and Owlsey spoke words he wouldn't completely understand if he was awake. But in the dream, the town below was not simply lines in the sand nor was Bertram merely a ghost.

He was. He existed here.

And Owlsey knew that when he awoke and came into the living lands, they would journey north to Mairoptis where he would see again who he had tried to save and watch again the duel come, of which none could save or delay.

He had moved in a great circular labyrinth whose passage was not seeded by distance but by time. He had not moved, the world had moved in him changing him a second at a time, an inch at a time.

He was no longer the man he had once been.

Suddenly he was flooded with names and the names kept flooding into his head, even she he had tried to save.

He awoke.

He wept as if he had never wept before, as if his eyes had not till that moment possessed the strength of tears.

He awoke and stood upon the spire and listened to the wind make mockery of him till Arl followed and led him back inside . . .

They made love then in the dark.

Roydon could remember this, the apartment, his lie to his

parents. But now it was deeper.

With each thrust of their bodies together conversations bled through. He could see his mother's face and his father's smile. He was divided, half of him existing here in the dark and half on a porch with the sun setting.

He could hear the conversation, individual words slipping through. "Position." "Opportunity." "Hope." Then backward now to the day of their arrival, those strangers seeking strange oceans.

And what his parents said about them which made him go seeking Arl out in hidden ways . . .

They were not alone of course. Three bodies shifted before them, writhing, their invisible dark bodies added to the night. It was as if the golden forms were left hanging tattered on wires and the flesh took on the night herself and wore this in mockery or praise of what she was.

About the three were others moving in, taking position with the core, and using this opportunity to indulge one's desires. It was the hope of this which the hlalymir depended on.

Had he been in his wraith form he could feel her, touch her breasts, her body but remain partially erased. She was abstract become detailed, a cat's eye blossoming slowly only into the lover's eye he knew, shifting sideways from what others were.

But he was no wraith nor was she abstract.

Hours later they retired outside.

Of the other seven, he never knew their names. They were not the same each time. The hlalymir sought out nine for their pleasures but they would often change bodies or beings, turning nine into myriad. Into multitude.

It was enough that he knew Arl. What she knew mattered only so much as what she knew about him. In the desert, she had probably sought out such an orgy to ease her mind. Were he human he might have been jealous. But Bertram had learned how to see as they saw and Roydon was a fast student. Still, he only

really saw her when he saw all of them.

Hours later they retired outside.

The spires were asleep by now. The bronze had all turned grey. The plant women could not devour the absence of the sun and so rested and the tlylamir were not welcomed to duel in these lands at their leisure. So, they would have to suffer alone in their rooms or if desperate enough duel themselves, and lose.

"Do you remember me, completely?"

"I know almost every day."

"What was it like for you?"

"In the sands, I spoke to the scorpions a time. Taught them Plato."

"You always hated Plato."

"It's hard to know what I hate anymore. It was the only thing I could think of. And you sometimes."

There was more. Bland conversations. Arl mentioned how Ulsaires was now home to a new colony of humans and how a part of the Earth was now officially hlalymir lands.

"Which part?"

She told him. Some island whose name he couldn't remember ever having heard of before.

They talked about the weather.

They talked about being apart.

They talked about Mairoptis where he would have to go. He imagined his hand passing cleanly through her breast at the mention of Mairoptis but he stilled himself and in touching her again knew this flesh was his and she a warmth expanding along his palm.

They talked about nothing at all.

There seemed a secret in this, standing, staring from pillars to wastelands below. Roydon imagined a spider spinning a web between the pillars, a spider as large as a god with Arl nothing but a snail crawling slowly to get away.

And what was he exactly?

Was he another prey to this imagined thing or was he a predator who made the monsters run?

In another room, a tlylamir slowly prepared for her death. This he knew. And he had saved her life a time only for it to end. She was going north, the lone pilgrim who had come to watch him regain his skin and come back again to life.

And she would willingly duel, even knowing that subtle disgust toward her murderer because, well because it was expected of her and because her murderer was possessed of wealth and taste. These were such simple human things newly acquired upon their Malisfelt. Something human had saved her and soon something human would seek her ruin.

All this he knew. Silently the pair spoke one to another without ever using words. Their existence was enough to span an epic by its silences.

Arl and Roydon talked about everything and said nothing at all, holding the secrets of each other and themselves away from the prying ears of the cities as the cities slowly walked north in their sleep, oblivious even to their movements now.

To Mairoptis, and a dying.

1) Whatever is, is today

Semnoc had glanced by then northward, or, depending on how one saw it, a future time ahead. In Azaeljia time flowed at a pace of its own, meaning one could step forward and arrive a year not yet or a year that was.

Seeing ahead he perceived the man. The ender.

"What do you see?" the scorpions asked, their broken forms coalescing to form an almost human shape.

Semnoc did not say.

Instead, he retired to his chair upon the savanna with the door to the under-country beneath and continued reading. He only glanced up once, just once, to see the ender encroaching the borders of his perception.

By then Chalna had ascended the under-countries.

He felt her jewel eyes upon him and could have imagined the small ice spines growing from her back which would in time become ice-veined wings.

Allowing her flight.

In the dark below were beings like her, and others, coloured grey as corpses with sharpened teeth dripping something adjacent to poison.

Taking up her chair composed of spider black threads she returned to her reading then.

In the distance, black-spined caeli trees were seen. One would find copses of them running atop their slender roots firing volleys of thorns like rain aimed directly at the unworthy and the worthy alike.

But the caeli instinctively knew not to venture here.

The man turned the pages of the book waiting for his protegee to do likewise.

The scorpions prepared as well. The broken bodies solidified, and slowed. Diamond and sapphire grew glass flowers atop them, around them, small blossoms of shields, waiting.

All things seemed to be waiting now.

In the dark below of course Semnoc knew Vygharnax had resumed her labours.

He could not say how he knew, only that he knew.

He felt her fingers sloping into clay, a seed of metal surrounding a husk of skin, herself shaping that husk along the mythologies of humankind.

She had made many monsters of humankind by now.

Though she was anything but human.

She scoured grimoires for demons, and birthed manticores and basilisks. She had made tiger women, jaguar women, and raven men. Lemnos was somewhere past the horizon, the last skulls of men being laid by their daughters to form the foundations of new temples.

Today a lourarix was being born, a nightmare that drifted through cracks of doors and obliterated entire families in the night. Humanity had had many names for it but over centuries lourarix became its final designation, as if all other words attached to it slowly slipped into void.

Chalna nestled beside him, inches from him, and he returned to himself to realize his student was engaged.

The book in her chitinous hands riddled itself beneath her sight. He turned from his revery to enter past the boundary line of the world she was creating beneath, behind her eyes.

In glancing at the text Ualthirchalna pondered words.

The scorpions, some at least, had divorced themselves from the body. She listened idly to the sound of blades, the scorpions, or rather the legs of them making a mockery of a duel. If it was meant as play or theatre even the man was not sure.

Ualthirchalna glanced back to the text, pages rustling in

those chitinous fingers blackened like obsidian is blackened, and then turned the page.

One could see the entire city from the clouds. If one wished they could gaze down and see the slender threads and glass citadels uprise, or small obsidian ziggurats. Or the soft pale throngs of people passing by like blood along arteries, divesting themselves into the small actuaries of hidden rooms like the chambers of alien hearts, or lungs.

One might even see the city breath if one tried. Tried to believe. High above the winged ones could be seen.

"Should be breathe, you know."

She looked to Semnoc.

"Breathe?"

"Mmm. Yes."

"The word is breath."

"There are two editions," the man said, feeling the chair as a fine labyrinth of spider threads, his mind caught suddenly upon the idea of himself tracing each road his own body rested upon. "In the first edition, it is breath, in the second breathe. It creates quite the image, either way. The city's breath streaming forth, mingling into the clouds, becoming the clouds perhaps, as if the whole thing were a circle without beginning or end.

"Or the city is breathing, walls tumbling forth the sound of lungs inhaling, exhaling. I think either image is evocative enough."

"So why assume breathe to be the correct word?"

"The habit of assuming the second edition is always an improvement upon the first. There are other mistakes of course. Always mistakes in no matter what we do."

"In?"

He smiled.

"Itself a mistake I guess."

The two were silent for a time.

His student considered the imagery, twisting them in her mind. Her people lacked the gift of imprecision. To them, a word was a solid thing fitted as a stone into all other words, incapable of being misled or transformed into some less than perfect state.

In the under-countries speech was crystalline.

Take her name for instance.

To Alberic Semnoc her name was Chalna. But to her it was Ualthirchalna. This was because ualthir was her designation. She was meant to fly, her ice wings buried in her back meant to uncoil allowing her to swoop upward in the thermals and be free. Had she been Malthchalna she would instead weave and her eyes would be eight and her hands would not be blackened as coal but grey as a corpse's touch.

And her teeth . . . long glittering in the dark, poison-sharp.

But it was not enough merely to say these things. Had the name been omitted, had ualthir or malth not been said it would have been as if the entire race were separate from itself even if the descriptions were the same.

To name a thing was to have power over it. One word was worth more if said well than all other words said, with even the merest lack of clarity.

As such the speech of men was something diamond-hard/absurd to understand.

Ahead he saw the ender come. It peered from out a century or more in his future, some darkened shadow of himself. In Azaeljia he had dreams like this when he slept though none else either slept or dreamed.

To the ameirab, the collected races of Azaeljia the idea of random collections of images jumbling atop one another, those moments of utter unclarity where nothing was possible did not exist and the human need for sleep was imagined as some disease. At times he feared lest even Chalna consider his sleeping body

infection and like all infections burn him away.

But though the scorpions collectively never slept individuals did retire meaning their lives were spent forever between the waking and the dream. And for this reason, they clustered about the man when night came on and he needed to rest his head, for neither fly nor spider would ever dare disturb a scorpion at rest.

So, he was spared to imagine that monster of himself from some future time, and as he dwelled here knew he would challenge whatever he might become by ending it.

Hence the poison ring with a horned elongated goat face upon it, while within the crystal egg whose cancerous touch would kill if his skin and it ever intertwined.

Chalna resumed her reading.

Ualthirchalna turned her eyes to the book again.

She found a new passage. This passage differed from the other and was in fact from a separate tome. The humans' gift was not a single book after all, but legion. Novels were here and poetry and poets flickered into existence and fell, some of them perishing a thousand years before humanity slipped the borderlands of Earth.

She began to read aloud portions of something familiar to the man.

". . . trapped pretending to be one of you and when I heard the signal I knew, *I knew* I was not alone . . . you know what I am. Has your master told you?"

"Yes, he told me you were all extinct," the man, without missing a beat, said.

"Yes, my essence survived . . . now a human shape again. I had hoped to reach your country of glass . . ."

"Should be *yet*. *Yet* my essence survived," he said.

She paused, thinking of the entire book a moment, glancing forward and behind. But she considered the word

appropriate though. For indeed he was extinct, an obliterated thought whose only semblance of being was the recollection of that thought, a shadow cast first by one shape and then another, it being identical to itself mere coincidence.

She said as much to him and he marvelled at her.

Later he would give the copy to Vygharnax and she in turn would give a copy to her students.

And for a time after he thought of her under-country.

The tunnels could go on forever but Vygharnax's gallery was unique, a rounded sphere whose invisible floor was glass giving one the illusion they walked the air.

And she was there, tending her brood.

She was not grey, black, white, or gold. Her skin shimmered from one shade to another but always there remained upon her a metallic malachite of some imprinted shadow, all other colours meant to merely obscure the truth of what she was.

As one entered the gallery it seemed bare but the longer one was there the more was added to it, books and statues and portraits of men and women and neither, and one could see the distended smiles of ualthir whose mouths lowered below their jaws in some remnant of an evolutionary past or observe a scientific tracing of a cyyytresk.

Yes, later tonight he would see the artist and remind her of the tome.

They read in silence for an hour and afterward, he gave her a seed of metal, the machine reduced to a mockery of itself.

And taking this she went into the savanna.

Because the ameirab could not dream nor could they imagine something unreal real stories were an incomprehensible tongue at first.

But slowly a way was found.

The ameirab learned to see stories as embryos, things of future tense, and since they could perceive the future as being all

they need to do is imagine what they read are things to come.

This would take time of course but the future is always there.

As such, slowly, one could place what was on the page upon the real and despite the imperfection of the language come close enough to approach the meaning behind the words.

Deciding quickly, she returned to the poem and recited it again. As she did the seed suspended itself in the air and began to grow. Or more accurately it began to acquire.

From across the savanna came small pieces of the dead. Grains of skin drifted backward against the machine fitting into place like some grey mosaic.

And slowly she began to sculpt.

The man watched, noticing ahead of him himself, blade in hand, screaming wild as night is wild, naked against the stars.

The clay was smoothed and rounded and suddenly the gravity eater appeared.

But there was no description of it save what she put into it. It was up to her to make the imprecise precise, however, she saw fit.

When the lessons began, she had merely stood before the clay, staring into space. Now however her hands laboured as she slowly fit the words into the meanings behind them.

The rounded form grew broader and there descended six limbs, six being a number held almost sacred to her kind. However if asked to explain why she would have merely said objaeljia, as if that explained everything.

A lone eye appeared now, sapphire as a scorpion's own. An affectation perhaps. Semnoc smiled at the hope of that.

Finally, fully formed she allowed it to escape her grasp as she whistled, the signal embedded in the machine to make flesh work again.

Vygharnax whistled too when she wished to finish her

labours and bring something to life again but there was always a metallic glare to the sound of her voice, the subtle ripple of violence echoing as if winter had succumbed in her glances and was allowed only a small escape, and only here.

Instead Chalna sounded a sweet softness which the man could have listened to forever.

The gravity eater ascended, long tendrils at its rounded based sloped across the savanna as it went hunting for the pressure of a world to feast upon.

Anywhere would have done of course, but being sentient in this moment the hunt was all. If it had been born at the exact perfect place even then it would have felt itself compelled to move, if only to later return having satisfied itself through its original discontent.

Satisfied his student returned to her chair and by now the monster on the grass, the scorpions, had built a nest of their own and settled some of their number into the likeness of a chair.

It was as if by causing distress in some the others had their sufferings slowly ebb away.

By now night was coming.

Alberic Semnoc mentioned he would sleep soon. The scorpions gathered near him, Chalna eyed him strangely and then she returned to the under-country below.

He laid out a mat of reeds and laid upon it.

The gravity eater observed and then moved on, passing near a city and a temple reeking of human bones.

2) These rough caricatures of sleep

In dreams sometimes the man would try to recall each mistake in his life. Names predominated this.

There was a story he knew where a character's name shifted, losing an *i* and gaining an *e* at different times. The name

itself was obvious, there was no other character in the story which had a name even remotely similar to this.

And yet in the dream, he imagined some other person emerging as if in the creation of mistake something new was born.

Dream was the wrong word.

These were more his ruminations, those pre-countries which existed just before sleep. It was as if there was the waking, the dream, and the hallucination between the two when the mind was so tired it returned to whatever had disquieted it in the waking, giving it one last time to dwell on error before the dream evaporated the very word "mistake." For in dreams mistakes did not exist.

Having no rules there was likewise no means of breaking them.

His most common dream, after the mistakes were ended, always involved the alsairiph though.

Before his time in Azaeljia he had dwelled in the land of Dulkana. And the children of Dulkana were called alsairiph. He was reminded of them, even now, even here and he never completely understood why.

The dream would begin as so.

He would become alsairiph, his eyes distending outward around his face and he was now able to see in all directions.

As such he would be given all views before and all views behind simultaneously. He could reach out with his two-fingered hand and pluck a cyyytresk from the air knowing its counterpart existed and now crawled along his back.

He could feel the cicada crawling along his fingers and imagine it crawling along the sun, slithering on its belly as if he were nothing but light.

The cyyytresk were creatures who allowed communion of a kind. They would seek out those in need of companionship, stalking the lonely and forsaken, leading two or more together,

subtly altering them to fit one another perfectly. In exchange for this they would draw forth the tsaiya kolob, and they in turn . . .

By now standing in the streets of Hlyarsithmyr, feeling the sun hot on his blank face, still knowing he could see all things, he began to feel it. *Still.*

Having eyes in all directions he saw all things equally and so should not have been surprised by anything.

And yet.

Yet there remained in his ghost psychology the merest hint of a thought that there was something behind him, always. And no matter where he focused his vision there remained this small terror to be found unawares, as if something stalked him even in dreams, as if it was invisible save at the moment of one's death, patiently standing behind one forever for that fatal time to come.

But though it could not be seen yet it was always felt.

Even by them for whom sight was dominant.

More than once this dream he had, returning to the mistakes of names in that brief after-country when the dream gave way and the waking began, an unfinished task spent of moments and eternities.

Vygharnax tended to her brood as the man entered.

The lourarix was almost ready to be born.

Malachite shadows crossed her face as she worked and Semnoc was reminded of the shadow of death.

She kept working, talking to him all the time.

Vygharnax was not of Azaeljia of course. Nor of Ulsaires nor Mairoptis, nor distant Xaxacia. Of what her origins were even she was not aware.

She was like those star-flowers who go seeking after prey but where they stalked lives she stalked ideas. In the country of the unreal, she was king.

Mentioning the dream, after first mentioning the progress

of Chalna, he asked what it might mean.

She mentioned the ender then, the beast at the end of the book of his life, and asked him what it was and what it meant.

The ender of things of course was a common fear by now.

In Malisfelt, since in certain places time moved differently, one could see the future, if but a glimpse of it.

And since humanity was considered the makers of things too often the only sign of a decadent end was to be the ender of things.

This Semnoc could see, had seen, would see again.

In his dreams, this fate did not occur, but there was a vague fear outside himself.

Even now as seconds slipped to hours he knew he might become something he did not wish to be.

"And there is your answer," the artist said, cryptically.

Just then, with the beast at the centre of the gallery, Vygharnax stepped back. She whistled a metallic symphony of a single note and the lourarix slowly stumbled forth, its eyes upon the man.

Semnoc beheld the beast as it came toward him, its jaws glistening with something adjacent to poison.

In that moment he was struck by the thought of his death, the slow recall a body would feel as it ebbed away, a pulse at a time, a breath at a time. As the beast came . . .

He stopped himself. He recalled Lemnos and manticores and the basilisks and how a basilisk could change a man to stone. He stopped himself then even as the beast came . . .

"It is day," he said simply, quietly. The lourarix slowed its motion and stared at him strangely. "It is day and you are abroad throughout the world. Is that how you are meant to be?"

The gallery was illuminated with the vague luminescence of golden fungi which lit the dark tunnel into a brilliant mockery of light. Pondering the light the creature stared upward, noticing

the brilliance about itself.

Then, imagining this brilliance was the light of a sun, that it stood not in the darkened gallery of its creator but beneath the bright daylight of an alien world, it began to fall apart.

An arm disintegrated, ashes became rain, and the rain slowly bled across the invisible floor making mosaics of unfinished worlds with each passing granule as they fell silent there.

Then legs buckled, head lolled forward oblivious to the lie and finally, it distended outward like a wound across the glass country of the gallery.

And was gone.

He almost apologized but the artist drew up a hand, silencing him.

Suddenly given the nature of the beast, he knew what he must do.

He left.

Chalna was there and the scorpions, either the same or a new mosaic of their cooperation.

He mentioned idly the day to his student and what he saw ahead of himself.

Asking if she could help, he presented the book to her.

She pored over it then looking up watched as he slowly swallowed a metal seed. As he did so he handed his poison ring to the scorpions, placing it upon a broken hand.

"Your final test," he said to her as if it was the truth. Glancing to the north finally, one last time, he watched the ender draw forth his blade . . .

Semnoc felt his skin shift as her hands moved across his body. He felt himself for a moment escape into an elder space and know not death. It passed as quickly as it came.

He felt her hands slope along his face, smoothing it away. His arms changed then, his legs.

Feeling this too the creature of the north began dissolving. By the end of Semnoc's transfiguration, the future he had seen could not exist.

The scorpions drew forth the poison from the ring allowing it to melt away into nothing upon the tyrant of the grass.

Speaking one last time to Chalna he mentioned he would return, uncertain if this were true or not.

Finally, he flew away.

His body was now thin as a twig in winter. He sailed the thermals and noticed ualthir there. There swarmed in the clouds such children who once were condemned to the earth below and in their company noticed cyyytresk making love between their shadows.

Below Chalna turned once more to the passage given, as if only now comprehending the words.

"Acarnan was named after a creature of myth which was born and grew to manhood in a day to avenge his father his murder viciously wrought.

"But Acarnan was no creature of myth but a tlyee, the second race from the shores of Dulkana born. And being thus it was given flight, strength to assail the sky nor ever land. For in time it would grow and grow, enlarge itself to the shape of clouds and encompass the world in its shadow, become a sky-whale who would never once even look upon the shadows it had made upon the earth.

"And in that future time to come when the things of former days had passed away it would be content."

WORLD OF BRIDGES,
WORLD OF SPIRES

1) The other side of sky

The tlyee could be seen in the distance, flittering away. One might even hear them despite the distance, cloud of threads and twigs murmuring their litanies, attaining godhood a day at a time.

A second at a time.

The ship she was on pitched forward and Rosalba adjusted her stance.

The scorpion embedded in her arm made a complaint. She glanced down at her forearm feeling the leg of the small mosaic working, slowly changing her, a day at a time.

A second at a time.

For a moment she caught the sound of an almost human tongue against the wind but only she and they and the tlyee were about and though the tongue sounded human there remained an alien barb to it as if the instrument of the voice had been shifted sideways somehow.

The only human here was her, in all the nation of Zaireb the only human thing was her.

The sand ship skimmed along the dunes, one ocean to its left and another to its right, the great Void Sea shimmering blackly in the distance like some mocking image of the clouds inverted against the nonexistent ground.

And for the briefest second, she felt alone.

Then a hand brushed her hand and she looked into the eyes of Oryaelzia. This almost comforted her. Almost.

"We approach," it said. Not he nor she, but it.

"Thank you."

The crew consisted of several gosolanjisa like Oryaelzia

and herself. There had been a few hlalymir but they had retired to the port of Isrengrym to be near the ocean and slowly regrow their sanity.

Only she was fool enough to remain hunting with them. And she was only now questioning her sanity in this decision, riddling the future with her only companion making roads along her veins.

A plume of sand was seen and the blinding heat of day was shadowed by it.

So.

They were closer now.

The tlyee slowly peeled back the clouds of themselves and a sky whale at last became visible.

It had hidden herself in the layers of her forebears, only now emerging into the light.

The cloud had been an irregular mass of twig-thin bodies but now the rounded mountain revealed herself.

She dwarfed the world.

Rosalba for the briefest moment envied her.

The leviathan was not merely a rounded form but a force of thought, an act of mind condensed to this mere titan of a thing.

It sailed overhead blotting the sun black, leaving the cool winds to congregate beneath it as if the north wind had waited until now, crouching in the sand waiting to be born and freed to stretch to its broad, full height. And be.

Rosalba continued her envy. Perhaps she noticed it.

The white of her long sleeve winnowing in the north wind was suddenly freed, reminded her of a place on Earth where such garments existed though often only as museum pieces now.

It was an ancient country of islands and blades where women wielded ancient spears plumed by a blade's broad edge.

Now however such garments were emblems to be scattered in foreign places and not even one in a million could

remember the origin of the white cloth or from whence it came.

But the sky-whale knew intimately everything.

She knew the names of each of her ancestors with a stunning clarity. She knew the first sign of life emerging and from out the Void Sea might well have seen the face of the fragmented god when all was darkness upon the waters save the shadow nestling above the deep.

She might even have seen the birth of this universe or the emergence of others, and might be one of the last witnesses to those few creatures whose deaths birthed creations themselves, those few who when extinguished would mean the end of *everything*.

Unless mankind or some other race took their place, stepped to where their deaths would create universes yet to come.

Only Rosalba imagined this, and a few others, though none from Malisfelt. There simply seemed something in the beast, some haunting look as if she had witnessed something no word nor thought could describe, implying their flesh was thought itself.

The beast sailed overhead and Rosalba heard the mocking laughter of something. Was it her?

Was it herself?

"We approach," it said again.

Shaken from her revery she turned her eyes to the sand.

Ahead the plume had dispersed leaving the trail in the dunes of their prey.

The sand whale was closer now.

Steadying herself the hunter felt the spear in hand, its broad-bladed tip like a leaf from a tree of knives whose edges had turned inward.

"I demand the first strike," she said.

"It was agreed upon," it said.

In a few hours, her blade would sing with blood.

You need not do this.

"I have to," she said, seemingly to no one in particular.

The wind rose and fell, as if in answer to her curse.

2) Not a man living who can't make a mistake

The gosolanjisa wore leather armour in such hunts.

It was a dull corpse grey which bled brown the longer one wore it as if the beast once dead slowly returned, fur staining skin, or the mockery of it.

By now the armour held not a single sliver of grey in it.

But Rosalba did not use armour, at least not of any physical dimension.

The sand ship skimmed forward.

It was a rounded thing, almost a dark reflection of the leviathan which was now sailing over the ocean where no other life could go.

The gosolanjisa however were from one of the few nations nestled beside the ocean and they were one of the few races who had ships and had gambled the waters in older times.

In those long days before ships were built for sailing and gosolanjisa hunted true whales, beasts who dwelled below. With harpoons they pierced such things to bring them home but that was ages before the shifting of the ways.

The gosolanjisa wore leather now in hunts as this, their armour the only recollection of when the oceans were opened to them and the entire scope of Malisfelt belonged to their fleets.

But Rosalba did not wear armour, at least not of any physical form.

The sand ship skimmed forward.

The beast was before them.

The dune sea of Zaireb housed such beasts, and in other places, but where others allowed them some measure of solace

those of this country actively sought them out. It was their only chance to remember how things had been.

The harpoons were readied. Rosalba gripped her naginata tightly, waiting. It was attached to a strong cord and she needed only throw it and it would return to her, carrying a portion of the dead with it.

She waited.

The sand whale turned by now, preparing to charge them.

The dune sea extended outward and the prow of the ship glistened with the ancient songs of the hunt. The hlalymir had been with them on a hunt before but now even they had retired to spend the day by the ocean they could never touch or venture to the Earth beyond where the welcoming surf would welcome them.

It was only the hunters and her and the beasts who swam the sands.

She did not know when she threw it, only that she did.

They too threw and the pierced skin roared. The ship was large enough to equal the prey but the prey was a living thing and the ship a dead mass, occupied only by the parasites of them.

They could strike it but it could strike all of them and measured against barbs was the full living weight of a god enraged.

And enraged it dove forward, splintering part of the ship.

But the dead held.

Rosalba did not know when she fell against it or first touched the caked skin, earth clinging like armour against it, but whenever she did, she did.

And it poured itself into her.

There was always the potential of this. Malisfelt was a place where thought flowed from shape to shape, so why not prey to predator?

Even while it thundered through her veins, she gripped

the bladed spear tightly and pierced the eye, feeling the cold inside her . . . remain.

After they butchered the carcass, they slowly dragged back to the city by the sea.

Rosalba was congratulated by the captain and she smiled.

Only the scorpion knew that something else was here with him, and her.

Something which was not cold.

Welcome stranger, the scorpion said.

If heard by him the stranger did not say . . .

Rosalba turned her dark-haired head against the pillow and slept. In certain countries sleep existed and in others was a foreign thing.

Here though they did not sleep they understood the concept well enough.

The gosolanjisa were not like hlalymir nor ameirab nor those plant women in their cities moving across the world. They were like blank statues, thickened bodies with neither eye nor mouth.

How they had evolved thus none could say.

Instead, there existed along the surface of them another form. It distended outward, this pale form of a body gifted of any shape at all, this glistening wraith pale body.

It was this frail, fragile thing that had spoken to her, this undying spirit who regarded its own body an external thing and moved it marionettelike to live the life it sought to make.

One could even sometimes see them, those frail forms forcing two bodies together, mouthless faces pressed one to another as if mocking the intimacy that would never be.

Gifted of their stone bodies only the hunts and the remembering mattered anymore, as if there had been a time when they had faces and their pale forms were not extensions beyond

the stone but the animating force beneath it.

Resting head upon a pillow, room evaporating, ship evaporating, leaving only country of sleep to occupy her, she slept.

Her normal dreams, as directed by the scorpion began.

She and others like her had allowed the scorpions to begin tailoring them. So far it was but a single mosaic fragment but in time she would allow an eye, a hand looking for an eye, a body to occupy her and given their full measure of power would make her something essential, something blissful even to her.

They would make her whatever she did not want to be.

No. No, that wasn't right.

The dream logic bled halfway into the waking and she thought they would make her what she did not want to be but the agreement was they would make her someone else because being herself was a punishment she could not bear anymore.

All things righted, her oblivion at a future time assured, the country of the sleep descended upward against her face like a shroud.

The dream began.

She was a jellyfish, one of six. Sightless yet seeing she felt cool waters and her glass-smooth form dragged behind herself thin threads of limbs and the rounded smoothness of her body transparently bent, elongated, bent, like the others.

Reflected in their forms she saw herself, even sightless in the logic of the dream.

Ahead there would come the cliff and the glass bodies shatter.

She could feel the poisonous touch of herself, barbs along her arms bristling, razor-thin limbs slowly pulling at her to not go ahead but the current was too strong and the others were departing and she could not be the last, not when all else in creation had already perished.

Leaving her alone.

Below, and this was a unique feature the scorpion only sometimes gave her, the worlds were seen.

There was in a glimpse an entire story behind this.

Her auditor of dreams had often outdone himself.

Twelve planets swam beneath her circling the ember of a star. A billion years ago the creatures of those worlds had ventured out claiming the Earth as their own, raping and butchering men and women at their pleasure.

Then crept some hand from the dark which placed them and their worlds at this ancient trench a billion years in the future when the human shape and mind were dead.

Despite the current, and sometimes and only sometimes, she would descend, her body godlike in its proportions to them, they gazing upward in their terror at the translucent eyeless beast who gazed at them as if she held the secrets of creation and the madness of her vision dwarfed their microcosmic concerns.

And sometimes she would strike those twelve worlds against the stone of the ocean's floor and watch them perish lest even murderers escape the end of things.

Then she would rise and allow the current to take her and feel the stone ahead crumple her body into oblivion.

Only then, had she mouth, would she smile.

The dreams after this diverged. Normally the scorpion would tailor something he enjoyed.

He would take Rosalba and divide her in half, separating what she imagined her darkness and what she imagined her light. Her life did not change beyond this though.

He would raise the buildings of her home city, place her family around her as pieces placed on a board, and allow her life to begin, seen through two pairs of eyes.

After a time, the conflict within, now given form and

shape would lead her to face herself, guns drawn, duel begun.

Duel ended.

Tonight though, such dreams did not occur.

Nor even was she given the chance to become a thing of glass in a glass sea. For her memory of this evaporated and can a thing exist if no one has any memory of it ever having been?

She imagined herself now upon the dune sea.

She was a woman. Herself.

It is important to make this distinction, to recognize in this one instance even in dreams she was no one else, nothing else.

Merely her.

Then she felt her arms distend and looking at them watched them slope into hooves. Her legs likewise broke backward and she imagined pain behind this, but no pain was there.

As this happened, she saw a hawk in the sky.

It was a massive winged thing, bronze-grey or dark gold and this encompassed her in its shadow.

As she watched she felt herself grow quite pregnant then.

As the shadow deepened above her stomach distended and she noticed the echo of pain but being now a creature of four legs the pain was lessened than it would have been if was she human.

The hawk flew lower.

In the distance, she saw a shark approaching.

It was a dart of silver and it was inching closer and as it did, she felt herself walk upon the sky. There was a moment where she was in two places, upon earth, upon wind, but in either place, she watched the hawk lower herself and then plunge into the sea beyond.

Shark grew closer till the blackness of its eyes was seen.

In the air, she watched wolves cluster near, and glancing to the waters beneath were birds, hawks, and ravens swimming as

fish might had, eons ago.

In the climax of the birth, she felt the fangs of a wolf or shark bear down upon her slender, doelike throat, as she screamed.

Not for any other reason but this.

Even as something unhuman she could not escape the stranger that she was beneath her breast.

That thin splinter of her retained identity roared out in terror as a second cry was heard . . .

She awoke to the sounds of a second cry and feeling the sheets of her bed were stained a crimson wet. This she knew intimately even without her eyes seeing it.

3) The langsuir

The door had opened, which she heard, the room now becoming real. Outside the weight, a small circular mass had been placed into the lock allowing the depression of it to slide the door open.

It was such a simple difference, a key composed of no jagged teeth designed to strike outward but a rounded mass falling into place as if balancing its confinement by revealing a greater thing to a stranger then.

It was not the captain but rather Ayrielis. Glancing to the blunt figure and the ghost trailing before it she heard the cry again.

Rising now, the scorpion whispering for her to slow she realized the sheets were not merely stained red but the red of her own body.

And something beneath them stirred.

"Slow," it said. It came to her, bending to the bed, its faceless shell eye level to her now, the wraith's eyes focused upon

whatever had emerged in the night.

Something beneath still stirred.

Carefully was the sheet removed. In all this time Rosalba should have panicked but there remained a coldness to her, even now, even in this.

And there remained the thought that this was the offspring of her communion with that she killed. If so, it was just. She imagined now to be burdened with life somehow.

Beneath the sheets, as they were pulled away the thing was revealed.

She imagined it was a writhing mass, some centipede given a boy's face. Then this smoothed until some vaguely reptilian form was there between her legs, but this too passed.

She realized that it was not the creature, the child, which was changing but merely her perceptions of it. Had she a daughter or a son she often would imagine them as beasts. What difference did it matter if the child were not human?

Ayrielis picked the child up and cooed to it. To him.

Dazed she did not realize it looked human. The scorpion himself had to weave perception behind her eyes to straighten her sight, turning imaginings off while leaving only realities behind.

The child was human, in appearance. Though only born, though still covered in a sheen of blood or bile it could have been mistaken for someone older. No. Not it. *He* could have been mistaken for someone older.

The child stopped crying in the arms of the stone.

At last, she asked the idiot-obvious question.

"What happened to me last night?"

Had the stone a mouth would it have smiled? The wraith did not nor the scorpion in her veins, nor even the child now. Perhaps only a stone would smile at such a question at such a time.

"Let us make certain you are alright," the wraith said,

“and we will go from there.”

“Is that mine?” she asked, finally acknowledging the child as something deserving to be hers.

“Let us make certain you are alright,” the wraith repeated and quietly went to a nearby wall to summon a surgeon for the wounded ones . . .

The child was healthy.

Dr. Donestre examined the child conceived and born in a day. Yes, healthy for a human though weaker than any creature it had ever seen before, for to a stone flesh of any kind was a weakness.

As for the mother . . .

Rosalba was in the medical bay staring at what death had conceived. There was no doubt in her mind that the sand whale had done this to her, placed a seed of itself inside and this seed had twisted to an unnatural shape.

A human being.

It cooed at her. He cooed at her.

The scorpion during this time tried to soothe the woman but found he failed more often than succeeded.

And this burden was proof to her their contract was flawed. For she gave birth to a child, something pathetic and weak.

A human being.

Surely the circumstances had demanded some abomination of a better form. Despite killing the beast of the dunes, she would have preferred to find the writhing rounded shape of such a leviathan in her bed.

Not this.

Not this.

And afterward, the surest terror to know the child, now hers, would have to be raised.

By her.

The crew would not, nor the captain, nor would they entertain her idea of returning the boy to the sands, making the false hope he would metamorphose more into the likeness of his father over time.

But the gosolanjisa knew what she proposed was merely death for a thing that lacked even knowledge of what the word execution meant.

And though the hunters had no difficulty in killing their prey something was unsettling even to them about taking the life of something that resembled oneself.

And Rosalba knew the child was inexplicably tied to her, and if not by the bonds of blood, then the searching eyes of the wraiths would keep her from murder.

So, she might as well feed the fucking thing.

It was about the third day that she felt the demon come.

By this time the child had grown.

Not being human in age though human in dimension he had grown and now looked to be almost a man.

Rosalba in this time hoped that by the seventh day he would be so old he would expire and told him so several times.

But her son only smiled and continued to work upon the only world he knew as the sand ship continued in pursuit of their prey, though dragging the corpse of his father behind them her son seemed to know they could make no more killing anymore.

And it was about the third day with Rosalba on the prow of the ship, her son behind her, and the spear blade-broad in her hand, that she felt the demon come.

It was the unsettling thing she welcomed, that dark clarity of something inimical to herself and hope of it at least ending her.

The thing approaching felt cool as winter is cool and malicious as a storm.

She welcomed it.

She waited for it.

She welcomed it as it came.

"Hello," she said to the demon as it appeared. If the hunters noticed they did not betray the game. If her son noticed, her son who smiled too often for her taste, her son who still called her mother and the more she mentioned hating him the more love he tried to show, he did not say.

"Hello," the demon said and sat before her in the noonday heat of a foreign sun, "you summoned me and I came."

The two were silent a time, the ship heaving from dune to dune like the pulsing of a heartbeat now and then.

In her hand, Rosalba held the sacred blade.

Regarding the demon she tried to discern in it some definable thing, some feature which was unhuman and therefore more welcomed than its hate.

But the very word betrays itself.

Demon after all is distilled. It is horned and cloven-hoofed and the smell of brimstone fire and a grin as broad as the world is dark and the wicked, wickedly wise eyes.

But no horns here. Nor grin. Nor even eyes she would have hoped to be vicious in their intelligence.

Rather a small man stood before her, his hand passing through the blade of her spear quite easily, wearing a black suit which periodically changed to white.

The only point she could not claim as human was some subtle edge to the demon, something which spoke more of a primordial thing as if in some ancient sea an ammonite or nautilus, or jellyfish, had evolved slowly upward from the ocean, gained legs, gained arms, gained face but there remained that hint of *something* lacking bones, as if the face could melt away revealing the glass body still beneath.

"I do not recall summoning you but I am glad that you are

here."

"What would have of me?"

"Let us go below and speak."

"We are already below," the demon said enigmatically, "and here is as broad and good a place as any."

"Very well. This I would have of you demon, to take my son and send him to Hell."

The demon glanced to the boy and then back to her.

"Damnation does not occur upon the words of another. If he be damned it is his own fate and his own will. Not yours. We have no authority over him as you have no authority over him."

"He is my creation which means I have stake in him. That means even upon this foreign world I can bargain. I am bargaining now."

"Do you think it so simple for one as I to come, here of all places, and commune with you? Do you think we are merely messengers hanging upon the words of mortals such as you? Who are you to make demands upon us?"

"I am his mother," she said. "He was conceived of a thing not of the Earth. Surely you would take pleasure in exterminating a virgin birth."

At this the demon smiled.

"Do not think we have any agency with what souls as you ascribe us to be. That imposter Christ exists in no paradise beyond death nor was there ever some angel speaking to a woman to be not afraid. Such words and stories were but creations of men and the rules of such fables have no sway with us.

"We are older things than the words or the wheel."

"What is your name then, given to you after speech was born?" she asked.

"I am Icosiel," he said, "a demon of the air. Though the name comes of human tongue their expectations of me are wrong. As yours are wrong."

"You have heard what I desire. If you cannot do this, then tell me who can."

And all the time the scorpion tried to speak but was rendered mute, not by the demon but by her.

The demon all this time studied him. Not her but the one beneath her skin. Yes, the bargain was struck some time ago. The scorpion promised he would expel whatever human was in her but alone could do little.

Pondering this the demon turned eyes to the boy.

Human, yes, yes human though not born of human agency and means. A laughing mayfly creature knowing itself fragile in the web of time, knowing he only has days where others centuries and desiring only to laugh and breathe the air, remembering in future tense when all such chances will never be.

And finally, the woman.

There beneath her lay something cold. It was human but was not like the boy nor any human the demon had ever known. Others often summoned such as he, rarely, but it still happened and normally they were summoned to give forth power to another.

But she was demanding a sacrifice, something out of Tophet or Baal, something the demons found . . . banal. And there is no greater crime than something ordinary to those who dwelled before the word or the wheel.

At last, he spoke.

"There is no higher than I, here. Vornicarym guards itself and its secrets well." Rosalba did not know the name but somehow the image of the Void Sea came to mind. "But I can take you to one who could do as you ask. You would have to depart this world to another." He extended his hand. "Will you come with me and take my hand?"

Without question, she did so.

As she did the scorpion slid from her veins, glistening to

the deck of the ship. He had escaped a vein in her left wrist just as the fingers of the left hand closed round the demon's hand then.

Without thinking the demon plucked this up and placed the scorpion upon the arm of the boy who without knowing became a second home for his mother's former companion.

And as he nestled in the veins still the scorpion heard it, indistinct at first but louder.

Welcome stranger, something said.

"How long will this take?"

"No time and forever. To those here no time, to us, eternity, though it will not seem so to you."

In a flash the essence of them was gone and in a flash returned.

4) They murdered silence with a kiss

Where before had been a dune sea now there lay a city.

Rosalba did not understand. They were confronted by an endless uprising ziggurat of stone, a tiered mountain broken in such a way that the higher one went the smaller the world became till at the tip there was no place to stand even while the mountain itself continued, just high enough to be out of reach and dwarf the ones who walked upon it still.

"Where are we?"

"This is Yrilon. It is what you would call Hell."

Beyond the city, she glanced behind to see what she assumed to be another desert. It was golden and seemed like sand, but, crucially, as she bent to regard it, she heard a whispering and sighing coming from it.

"What is this?" she asked.

"They are souls, each condensed to a moment in time." The demon bent and cupped a handful in his hand. "There is a perfect time in each existence which is both the highest and the

lowest. It is the most hauntingly beautiful, most jaggedly miserable moment of a life. Those who come to us perceive these times as if they were forever, never truly at peace, never truly suffering."

"And this will never end for them?"

"Why would you think that?" the demon asked. "In time even this will fade. In time even the country of Yrilon will pass into oblivion and they will be caught in the wake of that passing, dreaming a dreamless sleep. Come, the one you seek is higher. We shall go."

They ascended. The ziggurat loomed so massively that she expected each step to be her height but her perceptions righted themselves and the world was designed for her again.

"What is the name of the one higher than you?"

"She is called Ardardra. She is near the top of this world."

At the mention of the word "world" Rosalba looked to the sky.

There was a sky and there was a sun.

She imagined this meant Yrilon was like any other world, even like Malisfelt. Then she looked up more closely.

The sun was inverted.

It was a black pit, light streaming about it. Only when not looked at clearly did the sun return to gold.

But worse when looked at she almost recognized herself there. Not herself as a woman nor the black pit as a mirror ocean of the world here. No. Rather the black pit was her essence stripped of anything resembling form. It was her stripped to her essential element and she was staring directly at herself.

"Does this happen to all who come here?" she asked.

The demon was ahead of her and then glanced up.

"Only those like you."

"How many are like me?"

"I do not know. I only ever encountered you."

They further ascended the stairs as the flattened mountain slowly crawled by, as if only the mountain moved and they remained quite still.

"Those below, you said they come to you, yes?"

"I did."

"Is there any other place souls go?"

"Many," the demon replied casually, as if discussing the weather, "for after the story's run there are always multitudes. There are always many ways an ending can play out."

"Is that all we are then? Stories?"

The demon turned back and the world further slowed.

"You are that which came before the pattern was set. You are that which existed before the dice was thrown. You are that who needs to imagine purpose. You are that block of stone demanding to be made a statue. That is what you are. Story is merely the closest term I know which you can understand."

"And what are you and your kind then?"

"We are the spaces between each word said."

As they spoke a figure emerged from above them. Dark robes rustled and Rosalba was struck now by the reality that there were other denizens in Hell besides he and the damned and the one she sought.

The robes rustled and the figure was hooded. As it passed the demon waited patiently, standing aside the unknown monklike form, and as it walked the entire structure of the city changed.

No longer was it a single ziggurat but now a collection of spires. Suddenly Rosalba saw these towers intermingling with endless bridges turning the entire world into a spider web latticework peopled of endless throngs of souls.

Some she knew, by sight if nothing else.

Then the robed figure ascended upon a bridge and strode through a crowd of beings she did not know.

They were neither of Earth nor Malisfelt. Of that she was certain.

They were not of any colour she had ever seen and being a colour whose name she did not know she was at a loss to even explain them fully. Were they like men and women or like those children of stone? She could not say. She only knew they were and as the robed figure passed out of sight suddenly spires dissolved, bridges with them, and they were alone together again.

"Who was that?"

"Idaldji," the demon said simply.

"Who is that?"

"A demon like myself. In his steps, the universe conforms to his desires as in my steps it conforms to mine."

"Who were the people?"

"Them." He pointed to the sands below. "For a moment you glimpsed a different Hell. Where I see them as this, he sees them as that. Sometimes we shepherd them. He is doing that now."

He did not explain further what the word "shepherd" meant and for some reason, Rosalba was afraid to ask.

They walked further on in silence. After some time, the demon asked the only question worth asking.

"What happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You come here seeking the destruction of your kin. You have walked among hunters seeking the death of beings who did nothing to you. You sought communion with that thing beneath your veins to dispel your being human. I ask again. What happened to you?"

"Why does it matter." She said this not as a question, the inflection almost a command.

"It matters because Ardardra will ask and if you have no answer she will have no patience with you."

"Agraia aiel kermis cuthid," she said. She spoke the words slowly as if trying to get each syllable exactly right. The demon in hearing the words slowed as if each syllable were a weight his body adjusted to imperfectly.

"Where did you hear that?" he asked.

"From the *Atxarxaos*. You know the book I assume?"

"I do. We know all things in time since all things come to us, and what does not come we may discern by its absence."

"The *Atxarxaos* was written on Malisfelt. I got a copy of it back on Earth."

"A sacred text. Hardly a reason to harden one's heart."

"I took tsaiya kolob as well."

"Ah," the demon said the word so meticulously Rosalba was convinced he was mocking her. He was not. "And after this, your heart grew cold?"

"After this my heart stopped beating. I can feel it stopped even now, even when I am told it lives."

"We have time. Explain please."

"I'd rather not."

"This is my dominion child. It was not a request."

"Very well."

And she began.

"I knew about Malisfelt since I was a girl. I knew about the strange creatures here. I was so eager to come. I begged them. So, my parents travelled one summer to Ulsaires. I went with them and my brother.

"I saw their cities, heard hlalymir in their rooms making love, I too young to understand. Just sounded like music to me.

"There was a library. And in the library that book. And I read it. I didn't understand the words. Not then.

"I spent a summer in Ulsaires and watched the cities walking in the distance and that was the happiest time of my life. I

watched a ship pass by, a sand ship. It was called the *Ulsaireb*. It meant the lonely unicorn. Can you imagine that? They had taken a human word and attached it to them.

"In time we left.

"Back on Earth, everything had paled. Just a bit. After spending time among the hlalymir life in a small town seemed faded. My parents, they seemed faded too.

"And then, years after, when I was a woman I was given kethel red."

Kethel red was the human name for the tsaiya kolob, a more apt term for the dust which always retained that bright black colour of blood to it.

"What happened?" the demon asked.

"I saw everything."

"What did you see?"

"I saw myself as a girl standing in the cities of Ulsaires. I saw the books lined like corpses on the walls. I saw my parents fighting when I didn't notice. But more than that since what I saw through my eyes I saw through theirs."

"It must have been an exceptional dose."

"Twelve times more than a human is supposed to take."

"Whose eyes did you see through?"

"The hlalymirs' eyes. I was stripped naked by them. The drug was supposed to allow one to recall the memories of others but usually only one memory, distilled like wine. I received hundreds. Thousands.

"I saw myself. I was so small, so pathetic compared to them. I was nothing. Neath alien eyes what did being human mean? It meant *nothing*.

"And the words. I knew the entire book then, a sacred text, and those words caught out to me. Not *called* out, *caught* out, and I was rendered mute in the glances of it. Something so beautiful there is no word for it in any human tongue. It has no equivalency.

I was surrounded by this realization of the nothing I was.

"I resolved then to be something else."

By now on the ziggurat had reached halfway and could see the rest of the universe below.

"A most interesting story," the demon said. "But a lie."

Rosalba looked up at her guide with veiled contempt.

"What do you mean a lie? It is the truth. I took the drug, I was given perceptions of beings vastly greater than myself. I was left in that awful miserable place surrounded by such imperfect, miserable people. My sight was cleared . . ."

"A lie," the demon continued.

"The truth."

"If it is the truth answer me three simple questions."

"Alright."

"What are your parents' names?"

"Why they are . . ." And then she had to stop herself. She could see them, these pale and indistinct figures in her memories. She could see her father tending his carpentry and her mother tending the machine which sat spiderlike in the centre of their home, that machine which allowed her to contact even those of far Malisfelt.

But their names . . . what were their names?

"Robert and Sarah," she lied.

"I think not. Do not try to lie to a creature for whom lies are supposedly our native tongue. You don't remember do you?"

"No," she said too quietly, as if not wishing to be heard.

"I imagine there is much you do not remember. Question the second. Where was your brother in all this?"

"He was . . . he was . . ."

"You mentioned him only once and then it seems as if he vanished utterly. What happened to him?"

"He is home."

"I did not ask where he is. I asked what happened to him.

A dead man can reside at a location as easily as a living one."

"He isn't dead," she said, "he isn't . . . dead."

"I thought as much. Question the third. When did you decide to take your own life?"

"What?"

By now they had almost reached the top.

"I did not decide to kill myself. And after seeing all that beauty, hearing those wonderful, exquisite words . . ."

"Agraia aiel kermis cuthid, yes? Words so wonderful they have no human tongue to explain them? They are the last line of a funeral dirge, child. There is no beauty in them save for the dead. I ask again, when did you decide to end your life?"

"I never decided that."

"Twelve times the dosage of tsaiya kolob one would need to taste the forever past.

"Did you know," and here he seemed almost happy as he changed the subject, "that there is a tribe known as the zugulon, an entire race of warriors who battle in armour like beetles across a dung heap. And for them dying in battle is seen as the fulfilment of a life.

"They revel in the thought of death, child, they live to die. And not one of them in a billion would have chosen to poison themselves. To die in battle, being themselves, that is celebrated. Revered. But to die on one's bed, to drink the poisoned chalice and wait quietly like a coward? *No.* No, they would never allow themselves such a pathetic end."

"It is not pathetic to end the pain."

"Ah! There was a reason for taking such a dose. I can almost imagine the scene. You on your bed, your brother's things about. Perhaps you clutched a sweater of his to your breast."

"A hat," she said quietly.

"A hat. And there the cool red liquid by your side. It is pathetically easy to drop a few grains of sand along a tongue.

How much easier to simply add more to it? I imagine you thought your last thoughts would be all your memories of him. All flooding back at once. Was he older than you?"

"Younger."

"You would see his birth, his first birthday, second, fifth, his first words, his first steps, his first fight with you. A whole life condensed to a second to be shared, despite him being dead and you being alive."

"But I didn't see him. Not once. I just heard the hlalymir making love behind closed doors and the *Ulsaireb* on the horizon hunting things in the dune seas. And I heard those words again and again and again, not certain what they meant." She stopped then. Just before the final step, she stopped.

The demon looked like her son then realized those features were the same as her brother's had been. She hadn't noticed till now.

She started to cry just as they reached the top.

Looking about for the devil she wanted to take everything back, her desire for an end, her hatred. But looking about she did not see anyone there.

They were alone.

"Where is Ardardra?" she asked between tears.

"Perhaps she has gone to and fro throughout the worlds, looking for unrighteous souls. Should be here. Perhaps it is simple fortune she is not. I suppose you will not get your desire now child."

"I have my desires fulfilled," she said.

"Fair enough. Then I suppose our bargaining is done. I will return you to your home upon the ship. Upon the *Ulsaireb* which you had seen once before, so many years ago."

"Wait."

"Yes."

"Is, is my brother, is he here?"

"He is."

"You said they are neither at peace nor suffering. Does that mean he is happy?"

"It means the illusion of life remains for them there upon the sands or in that world of bridges and spires. Perhaps he may even dream that you are there waiting for him or journeying with him on a voyage that never ends."

"And when I die, will I be with him?"

"I do not know. Perhaps in time, you will not wish to journey with your brother but with your son. Of where that is I will not say. We must still torture you a little bit after all."

She smiled at that, realizing he was lying. There were no other places the dead went to when they died. There was only one hidden behind an endless sea of masks and forms all designed to give the illusion of someplace other than themselves.

"Why have you done this for me?"

"I was bored," the demon lied, "and to venture upon Malisfelt is not easy for my kind. In time Vornicarym may dominate even the Earth and we may be exiled to a further abyss, to worlds unfinished whose creatures are unfinished too. And," he said, his face suddenly softening, revealing a form Rosalba might have mistaken for Ardardra's own, "your brother asked me to. There is that."

Rosalba could not tell if it were true or not, that last detail that snaked across her mind. But she knew it didn't matter.

In a flash the essence of them was gone and in a flash returned.

She was upon the prow of the ship as the dune heaved it up and down like the beating of a heart.

She looked to her son tending the ropes, the stone bodies and wraiths about him where they had stood an eternity before. She beckoned to him to come and sit down.

He walked over and did.

"Are you alright mother?" he asked.

"I am." She felt her chest noticing the heart beating there. "I just realized I never gave you my name."

"Bastard seemed to work fine for you," he said.

"A better name. I think I will call you Isaac."

"What sort of name is that?"

"It was my brother's name."

The scorpion inside the boy turned along his veins as if listening to a carefully perfect sound. Had he mouth he might have smiled as a stone smiles then he whispered to those mosaic pieces of his kind aloft the dunes to come for him, his labours now ended for a time.

Then he slithered from the labyrinth of the young man's veins and invisibly fell to the dune sea.

Suddenly she remembered her parents' names and the streets by her house, the feel of rain on her face and the way fear crept in with the thunder and her brother's hand in hers, there in the room surrounded by books lined on the walls like a choir of angels waiting to be revealed through the lens of their eyes.

Finally allowed to sing.

MONKSHROUD

Prologue

One would find in certain libraries new books appearing as if grown from the ambient, as if being born from shelves or walls.

These would also appear in tram stations, cafés, or in small restaurants and pubs where an idle hand would pick them up and an idle eye begin reading without being consciously aware of it.

The *Gospel of Vornicarym* was one.

The fragmented god became a figure observed, obscured, and discussed the way one discusses the weather.

The book itself was usually black or failing this a thin mosaic of sapphire and a wine dark sea malachite, but who the author or publisher was the book did not say.

Beside this was *Tsaiophen, The Book of Unfinished Worlds.* It was a catalogue of lost and unknown places all placed in the fictional galaxy of Aulb. There was grey Reralis about the star Alchanar, the ocean moon Zarilanix, or Yugolis of the five suns.

But the stories stopped at random places leaving the reader wondering what would have happened next.

And this did not even address the hawk world of Terenis or Erenemyr where the dead sang, or Shanrir . . . oh *god Shanrir*.

When this book was discovered to also not be of human thought it was decided an emissary would need to be sent back to Malisfelt to make trade.

A priest was selected for his mission, tasked to go to the nation of Xerzura at the southernmost clime where these books began and lay a few tomes of their own there.

After all, it was time surely for God to claim the souls of Malisfelt . . .

1)

Father Shaelin arrived on the 26th day of the New Calendar in the year of Lord M. One would have mistaken Lord M to be a title but this was not so.

Lord M was one of the twelve figures the natives of Malisfelt had chosen to clothe their solar cycle. Half were human, half themselves.

One year was devoted to Sthraija, another to Onza Cuitlamitl, and a third to the Shaper of Things. One was often hard-pressed to know the origins of one or another of them, especially the Shaper and Cuitlamitl.

After a while the origins did not matter, only where they ended.

Father Shaelin arrived at the city of Xerzura, known also as the Paradise of Birds. He arrived with a suitcase, his articles of office, the religious texts his order considered most important, and a determination to leave this here and make those of Malisfelt true servants of God.

By this time there had been many faithful who had come to Malisfelt but there had also been many of Malisfelt who laid their alien faiths across the Earth.

It simply wasn't done. This *Gospel of Vornicarym* in particular had to be challenged. And having read the book imagined he knew how best to challenge it.

"Ah Father, welcome."

He had arrived at the city by flyer, a small mechanical sparrow which had lit from Ulsaires to here. Xerzura was not like any city he had ever seen before. Or at least not like any city of Malisfelt.

He was convinced, but for a moment, he had stepped back into Rome.

The ancient architecture was here and the roads and even the sky somehow twisted sideways to become the same blue he

knew back home.

There was even the Vatican here.

All that was missing was the Pope.

His contact stepped toward him and took his suitcase but the priest demurred.

"It is mine," he said simply, "I will take it."

"Of course. I am Ascalios. You are welcome here. Please, I will show you your apartment."

They began to walk the streets the priest knew too well.

"When your government agreed to have a priest come and debate our missionary work, I had not expected you to provide such comforts of home."

"What do you mean?" his guide asked.

"This city looks like Rome."

"Ah yes. That was not for your benefit though."

"I did not think you'd change an entire city just for my benefit. Still . . ."

"No, no, this was changed some time ago."

"Then I take it you are fans of Rome."

"Rome, yes. And Beijing. London. Alexandria. Not merely the cities as they are but as they were. Please."

They had stopped before the priest's apartment and climbed the stairs he had known since he was a young man.

"Your room."

It *was* his room.

There was the same chair he had owned since he was twenty. Here the exact copy of the Vulgate lying on his desk, his desk having the same coffee stain at the corner it always had.

"When you are settled, I am to take you to our Ministry of Religion. We will discuss your ideas then."

"How did you do this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"How did you get my room perfectly?"

"We wish to make things as exact as possible. Many of the nations of Malisfelt have found human cultures to be . . . fascinating. But as you know full well it is one thing to be *enamoured* and quite another to *experience* a thing. The hlalymir have a great deal of experience on Earth but they have no real experience of the Earth being within them. If our worlds are to survive Father they will not do so by half-measures."

After his speech, he left.

Was it a he?

The priest put his suitcase on his bed and returned to the question again. Different races here had different genders and appearances. Tlylamir and hlalymir were female, more or less, but gender seemed to be more varied in certain as yet unseen places.

Those of Xerzura seemed human in appearance save the eyes. Yes, the eyes were different, not slit-length nor wide nor oval nor round. If he could describe the shape of them, they were Moebiuslike, without ever really explaining where he got the adage from.

Otherwise, they looked human, unless there was something about them in their nakedness that was not revealed due to the clothing they wore.

"Fuck," he said and went to his desk. The last thought he had was because of a line from that book of unfinished worlds. Wasn't his at all. It was a thought from an alien mind.

He took out his pen and began to write.

By now there were machines so small one could embed them in their hands, machines which could record a voice or control an instrument or transcribe a message even on another planet.

He would need only speak and his words would echo even now in Father Tarwen's study as if they were only a corridor apart.

But Father Shaelin preferred to write and taking his

leatherbound notebook did so, describing his voyage to the Paradise of Birds.

He didn't stop until night when he lifted his head from the desk, the lamp by his elbow automatically turned on at the sense of light's absence beyond and idly he went to his window.

Below was his street and the vendors selling the bread he loved. They were not the people of course.

They were someone else.

"Tomorrow then," he said. As he laid his head down to sleep, he wasn't even sure if he meant tomorrow he would begin his great work, or partake of a piece of bread.

"Ah, Father Shaelin. You look well."

He finished eating the bread in his hand and noticed the guide coming up the old road. The vendors had made a good deal, the same deal as home and the priest enjoyed the flavour of something so familiar to the stranger here.

"So, when am I to see your Ministry of Religion?"

"In an hour," his guide said.

An hour. An hour.

"You use our measurements of time here?"

"Oh yes. We will use a different measurement later. Perhaps next season. We are putting it to committee now."

"I am rather astonished at your adherence to Earth. I was sent here to convert you but it seems a wasted trip."

"Oh no, not at all. We have the buildings surely but that isn't the same as knowing what goes on behind them. Here, for example," Ascalios indicated a nearby apartment, "we have on good authority the rape and murder of a child by her mother."

"When did this happen? I heard nothing of this."

"1754. It was in July. Your calendar. And here," indicating the street itself, "a soldier stood, part of a legion whose survivors faced Parthian archers in a distant land. Oh, it is such a

marvellous thing to learn, but merely having the details is nothing without hearing witness testimony."

"You do realize the purpose of my mission here? Since you sent your missionary books to Earth it made perfect sense for us to send our religion here. My goal is to convert you to our faith."

"*I know*," and here his guide almost shouted with delight, "and it would make us most happy to accept your offer of conversion."

"As simple as that?"

"Oh, simpler." And with this the pair went walking, talking as they went.

"I am surprised by your behaviour sir," the priest said.

"Oh, why?"

"We have gone to other nations and know others have sent their faithful as well. *All* have come. But normally they have achieved little. A few converts certainly but generally only a few. When we found your books we assumed you to be firm believers . . ."

"In what?"

"In this Vornicarym, this spirit of the Void Sea. The fact that you spent so much time on the nature of this Vornicarym seemed to indicate you worshipped it as a deity."

"Whatever gave you the impression of *that?*"

Father Shaelin was slightly taken aback by the final word. It was as if Ascalios was genuinely surprised that the priest had assumed the *Gospel of Vornicarym* was genuine.

"If you do not consider it to be a deity then I will be happy to demonstrate to you the true one."

"Excellent," his guide replied, "and we shall go and do likewise."

As they passed a large pool of water Father Shaelin was slightly taken aback by that phrase too. The Biblical passage was well known to even the smallest child but he got hold of the

impression there was an extra meaning behind the words.

Were he a superstitious man he might have assumed some mischief. But he was not a superstitious man.

The office of the Ministry of Religion occupied a rather large spacious building and seemed to hold only three men within it. No other personnel were seen.

He was led into an utterly lavish room with gold adorning the walls and high broad windows, three of them like some trinity of eyes staring at the plaza down below.

The Minister of Religion sat behind a rather broad desk, smiling.

"Father Shaelin," he said, raising a thick hand to the man, "welcome to the Ministry of Religion."

The priest sat, and his guide sat to his left. Of the other two figures, they mentioned other matters involving Alexandria.

Passing the great moon doors the three now were alone in the nearly empty world of the ministry.

"So?" The Minister inquired imploringly.

"So?"

"So where shall you begin?"

"I don't understand the question."

"You have come to convert us. We are here to be converted. What are the steps? What is the ritual?"

"A sincere belief in God, observance of the sacraments, the use of priests. I say, are you just going to interview me and that's it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where am I to step to sir? Where is my pulpit? Who is my congregation?"

"Oh, we have arranged an entire cathedral, especially for you. And we have many thousands eager to hear your words."

"When the bishop spoke to your representations on Earth,

he was worried that this was some sort of trap."

"Trap?"

"Yes. You will forgive me sir but we have been burned before."

Still smiling the Minister said he did not understand.

"The hlalymir and tlylamir studied religion. So did the star-flowers. The ameirab too. They have all studied our texts."

"I see."

"And we have sent figures, like myself, to convert them."

"Yes?"

"And usually there has been some, let us say, lack of interest."

"Yes?"

"And am I to understand that your entire nation, millions of your people will accept the faith of Rome simply by my sermon? That's it? That's all?"

"Of course."

"Again, I must ask, is this a trap? We are often taught when things look perfect expect something rotten at the core."

"My good man, my good Father, the people of Xerzura desire only to be converted."

"Why then the *Gospel of Vornicarym?* It was written here. We know it was."

"So too was the *Tsaiophen* my good Father."

"What does one have to do with the other?"

"It is not important now. What is important is the arrangements to be made. As I said we have the venue set and we have your audience in attendance."

"You are aware of certain concepts of my faith. Confessionals for example."

"Oh yes, we are looking forward to that."

"And to serve under the Papacy."

"Oh yes, quite."

"I am curious, if another faith came here would you reject their idolatry and remain with the true faith?"

"I cannot answer that my good Father."

"Why not?"

"I do not know what idolatry is."

There was a short laugh at this but Shaelin was not certain it was not at his expense.

Yet somehow all participants here were in earnest. He knew this.

"Alright. What is the date for my sermon?"

"In four days. More than enough time I assume?"

"More than enough. Once completed and once certain of your adherence we will send more priests."

"You may send them all my friend," the Minister said. "And we will welcome them with open arms."

They left, passing the doors, the priest looking at the Minister watching him leave. There was an uncertain terror in this, something unsaid. No. Not terror. The Minister was utterly in earnest.

He was a fanatic before he even had reason to be.

And to the priest, this was a most striking thing.

"Are you comfortable?"

"I am," the priest said, standing once more before his old/new apartment.

"Good. I will show you the city tomorrow."

"It is my city," the priest said.

"It is. It isn't. I will show you anyway. Sleep well."

The guide left.

Shaelin ascended the steps in the dark, rounding the rounded staircase one step at a time. Such a simple thing.

Then he heard the noise.

Outside in the street was a sound of metal crumpling. He

raced back down to see someone standing before him. The figure was dressed as an ancient Roman soldier. He was walking down the street but had stopped directly before Shaelin's door, waiting.

Waiting for him.

And now he was gone.

And across the way the priest heard the scream of a child, then silence, such breathtaking silence it seemed the whole world had drowned in the sound of that death.

"1754. In July," he whispered to himself. The city did not change, except . . . *had* the city changed? Were he superstitious he would have imagined ghosts or demons but neither soldier nor child was a specter. No, this was something else.

Were they machines, seeds of metal grafted onto dead cells of animals or plants?

Perhaps.

He imagined he should be afraid but wasn't.

He climbed the steps as he heard the sound of cannons, the march of soldiers, imagined the Tarquins being driven from their homes and Caesar stabbed defending himself with a stylus and Mussolini hung from a lamppost.

He went to bed.

He slept.

2) Unity among difference

He awoke to find no sounds of past times. Outside vendors were selling bread, he went down and bought some then returned to his rooms.

Ascalios came later in the hour and Shaelin asked about the soldiers and the scream.

"You heard them then?"

"I did. Were they machines?"

"No."

Ascalios sipped at a cup of coffee in his hand, the cup found in Shaelin's cupboard, the coffee imported from Mars and despite a mild surge of irritation, the priest accepted the intrusion.

"Who were they?"

"They are people. Like you."

"I don't follow."

"Screwtape," the alien said enigmatically.

"I know the name but what's the reference?"

"We have studied various religions and ideas across all of Malisfelt and all of Earth. But one idea we found most intoxicating."

"*The Screwtape Letters?* Why?"

"A demon instructs his young kin how best corrupt a soul. It is a delicious book Father, an exploration of a man's life viewed by something with near total access to the man.

"Now, what would happen if our demon was forced not merely to tempt one man but to experience the temptation and the fall firsthand? Or an angel? How would an angel deal with the pain of being something other than an angel? Could an angel, if allowed to experience pain, truly remain a perfect being? Or, and here is the essential point, *would that experience not make a being more perfect?* If knowledge is power there is no finer knowledge than the divine."

"That does not explain the soldiers, nor the scream."

"1754. A July day. A child is raped. Murdered. The experience embeds itself into the room, into the walls, the floor. A soldier endures the loss of his comrades and brokenly stumbles to Rome, staggers, slouches to his Jerusalem, waiting to be born."

"Yeats."

"Yeats. We have read him and Gerald Manly Hopkins. We have studied oceans of hymns. And we have seen Yeats write his masterpieces when this was a portion of Ireland."

"This isn't a reproduction of Earth then, is it?"

"It is not."

"How?"

"How are we doing this? A simple matter. We displace a single moment in time and transpose this over our city. Then that moment we extend outwards, encompassing its birth to its death. Usually, we simply retain a single space of time but other eras slip though, now and then."

"Allowing you to watch entire human lifetimes."

"Quite so."

"And your conversion?"

"Genuine. Utterly genuine. What is the good of seeing Rome without truly experiencing every piece and portion of it? We cannot have this city whole until we truly *know* what it is that you know."

"If you have access to all of Rome, if you can see all those lives you don't need me to convince you. The proof is there."

"If I did not know you were there, how would I argue your existence? It is one thing to observe from without. We must stand *within.* Come, have your breakfast and I will give you a tour of a thousand years."

"Rome is older than that."

"We can visit the next thousand or two after lunch."

He ate, thinking about all that Ascalios said, his guide waiting patiently outside now.

When finished the priest went down the stairs and quietly the tour of the city began.

Usually, this was his Rome. But there were gaps and places and knowing the locations of this Ascalios led him to the centuries or years the priest wanted to see most.

He stood in the Vatican and watched one Pope after another ascend. He watched the process of their ascendancy as well, men voting upon the nature of who should lead the faithful.

He even watched a few of the times when they were stuck in a room without a roof, their momentary jailors hoping the deadlocks would be reached by the time the rains began.

Art after this, after studying the minutia of his faith.

Sculptors and painters and the famous Chapel with that madman on his scaffolding there between earth and sky, his paint smearing itself across a slightly greying beard.

Others, so many others until they blurred together, cherubs and soldiers and male wrestlers pretending to be women all smearing together to form a single picture that was Rome.

Lunch then and then back as far as the Tarquin kings, further until a street held only a rough patch of twigs, and the people there had tattoos along their bodies and spoke a language the priest did not understand.

And the day ended.

That night the sermon.

The next day the sermon.

And the next.

Shaelin spent his days feverishly writing all he could. Here was the entire scope of a world reduced to eye-level and the people here desired only to be more fully embraced into what they saw. If his sermon was a success, why if it was a success, it would permeate the walls of the cathedral and remain long after his death. He might even see himself giving that sermon a year from now, standing in two places at once uncertain where he truly stood.

By the day of the assembly he was finished, his balding head soaked with sweat and his eyes at once burning and at once cool. When the last word ended he stopped and stared into space, and prayed.

He was not certain what he was praying for. A good job? The validation of his faith? For God to be listening and stir their hearts to salvation?

But he prayed.

And that night he went to the cathedral.

And they came.

3) The gallows of chance

He spoke before a crowd of ten thousand and spoke of the articles of his faith and the rock upon which his faith stood. And they listened. And they heard.

Faces so like those of Earth rose in rapt attention and listened. To spend the entire time upon his sermon would be an impossibility. All that mattered was his words seemed true to him.

But as he spoke, he noticed it.

He was not certain what he noticed. Then he realized he was standing upon a pulpit imported from another place. There in the cavernous maw of this cathedral, this stony leviathan the pulpit had not come from here.

Its stone had come from Egypt.

A splinter bled through a moment then. Just a splinter.

He was staring out at a vast sea of huts and in the distance, a pyramid or two was seen.

Of course. This was the days of Moses. There was a subtle poetry in this, father of one faith glimpsed by acolyte of another.

Then he heard the cry.

He watched a young boy come forward out of the huts. He was crying and the tears sticking out like rivulets of dirt and his dark face was turning to the left and the right, finding no one there.

The priest was speaking upon forgiveness watching the boy stumble from the small square hut out into the street, and the stench of bodies uprose then.

This was the day of the plague.

The boy was one of the only few survivors. Some argued the people of the book had never been here, never been slaves, that the myth of this was some embellishment.

But if this was not the day of *the* plague it was the day of *a* plague and there were already too many to count in a city of so many thousands of years.

The boy crept closer, crept onto the pulpit, and with a single step passed through the priest as he felt everything the boy felt, all the loss and the broken fear.

His lips trembled but he went on.

He turned back once, just once, to find the boy had gone, leaving the grief behind to stain the priest brokenly like a shroud.

And some time later he was done.

The congregation lined up at the door then, he made his solemn way to it, shaking hands with all of them as they passed into the night and were gone.

Many felt the touch of the divine they said.

He said very much the same.

Before he left, he closed the doors, locking them tightly behind himself as he left.

"A brilliant sermon," the Minister of Religion said the next day. "Most valuable."

"Then your people will convert."

"Of course."

"I saw something . . ."

"Ah, I do not believe you *saw* something but rather *felt* something. Did you not?"

"A boy's soul crossed paths with mine."

"Yes. Yes, these things happen."

In the spacious Ministry of Religion, the thick-bodied man had risen from his desk and had gone to where the priest sat.

"One can't help these matters I'm afraid. They happen

now and then."

"If you can do that, touch a soul . . . I still don't entirely see the point of me being here."

"Last night you spoke, yes? And you laid out your request, yes? And we have that, your words preserved forever to be placed as a splinter of time. We have saints and prophets and figures of old. And we have converted to them."

"You have converted to my faith, sir."

"We my good Father have converted to *all* faiths."

As they spoke the room changed.

They were no longer talking in Rome but were now in some other European city. Prague perhaps, or Berlin.

The priest could not tell the year.

"I assume you have requested someone else to come?" the priest asked. "A minister this time?"

"You were the first emissary, but yes we have selected a minister."

"And the *Gospel of Vornicarym*, what of that?"

"If you are asking if we believe that our world was created by a black oil which fled from the stars and united two planets into one, that this oil was some divine thing, even able to see the future or to peer into the soul, I would have to say no, not really. Of course, I would just as easily say yes."

He saw it then. Not only did they move a city, transposing a terrestrial environment over their own dominion but they did this act simultaneously. As he spoke now, as he laid bare the sermon some other figure, an occupant of Prague or Berlin had done likewise.

And the converts had diverged. They listened to the priest and believed and listened to his counterpart and believed. Then they would simply stitch themselves back together again. The fact that he would come after the priest did not matter since they had all the time to walk and wander as they wished. And what was

before or after for such as them?

"We came to save your souls."

"And we happily accept the offer. And we shall go and do likewise."

"Emissaries to Earth, preaching worship of Vornicarym."

"Of course not!" the Minister almost spat. "We would never do such a thing!"

"I don't understand."

"We would send emissaries regarding the *Tsaiophen*."

"You would send missionaries to the peoples of Earth to preach about a nonexistent galaxy and alien nonexistent creatures? Even Shanrir?"

"Especially *Shanrir*. Imagine it," and here the Minister's eyes glistened like serpent scales, "a planet filled of the angelic tsuairab who dwell in islands of paradise surrounded by seas of birds' wings listening forever to those haunting melodies.

"And when they leave, they leave but thread behind to link world to world, all together in the great web of their beauty, stepping wherever they wish, in fire or flood and . . ."

"And?"

"And there we stop and say no more. This alone is worthy of consideration."

"But the story doesn't end. You don't tell what happens next."

"That is not for us to do. The convert must decide how their faith will lead, not the instigator of that faith."

"But it's not real," the priest said.

"And how is that any different from any other faith?"

"You mock me," the priest said quietly and rose to go.

"I do no such thing, good Father. What is faith?" And here the priest stopped. "I will tell you. It is standing before a hut and imagining a palace there. It is looking at a bird flying and deciding that you will fly someday as well. We do not mock you. We wish

to be converted. And we expect, in some future time the expectations of our faith will come to fruition. Even if it takes a thousand years. If you have seen what we have seen you'd know this. Faith is stronger than stone and moves the worlds."

He stopped then, cold.

He returned to his chair.

"What do we do now?" the priest asked.

"I will summon Ascalios and let us picnic on a hill. There is a crucifixion you might like. You might even touch his hand. Being upside down it will be easier for you to reach."

"I might feel unwell after that."

"I think for the first time you do not feel unwell. I imagine that knot in your stomach has eased."

He hadn't noticed before but as he sat there was something comforting about staring across from the man.

"Can you play chess?" the priest asked.

"I can." He drew forth the board from his desk and opened it, the pieces resting neatly inside. As if he expected it.

"Let us do that instead and later I will make my report to my superiors."

"Which would you rather be, light or shadow?" the Minister asked.

"Surprise me," the priest said.

The game began.

SHIBBOLETH

Prologue

This is the story of humanity's first encounter with an alien race. It is the story of how mankind encountered Malisfelt and of what befell the human race.

And of what befell the nations of Malisfelt.

1) The chameleon planet

Held in her hand as the ship arrived was the book. It was A. A. Kemon's latest, *The Smoketree and Other Poems*. One would be forgiven for thinking this wasn't important.

They would be wrong.

Amalric Strahman had come into the observation room just as she had closed the book and both now were staring ahead.

Before them was a sight that was considered until a second ago possible but now in seeing it impossibility melted away to be replaced by only what was.

Positioned far from its parent sun was a planet. This planet appeared to have only a single continent upon its surface composed of a vast and jagged coastline which extended almost from the north to the southern pole.

Scattered about were a handful of moons, later to be given names such as Tlistia and S'raithrya but for now known only as Satellite One and Satellite Two.

But neither moon nor ocean nor continent was the striking thing about the planet.

What was striking was that it was mirrored.

There were two clearly visible planets melting into one, the world ocean cupped about two spheres while the continent appeared to have been cut in half, each perfect half occupying one

portion of a separate world.

And yet somehow both halves were so close together one could step from world to world as easily as crossing a room.

And more. One further detail.

For at the heart of the dual continent lay a singular black oil. It roiled and rose and surfed and surged and fell and she was aware of its motion across her vision as surely as if it were but inches away, snaking before her and behind her, tempting her with a sin she could not as yet describe.

The book fell from her hand then.

The book fell.

Strahman was already marvelling at it. Of the twenty planets they had surveyed this was a gem. Not only was it covered in water, not only was it brilliantly lit by a sun in mirror of Earth's own but there were clear signs of habitation upon its surface.

Here was another cradle of another sentient race. For a moment the man imagined himself a god staring over a universe he had somehow made.

And the woman?

She picked up the book before commenting.

Once it was picked up, she turned back to him and asked the only question worth asking.

"Have you relayed our information to Command?"

"They know," he said simply, "did it before I came here."

Arisa Marcien turned back to the scene before them.

"We have found life," she said simply, idiotically. He turned to stare at her.

She by now had returned to reading her book.

The planet below was ignored.

The hlalymir and tlylamir could have been contacted first. One has to remember that. Of the various races, it was the

hlalymir and the tlylamir who immigrated most into human cultures. After them came the cthraelisthria flower women.

But they were not the first ones contacted.

Strahman sent a basic numerical sequence to the planet under the assumption any advanced species would recognize it and respond.

There was a response from a northern nation later to be known as Decara. Sitting in the womb of the relay station, small spiders of machinery clustering about his body he sent the signal not imagining a response.

But it came.

Message received and replied to.

And after it something he had not expected.

A voice at the end, speaking to him.

Telling him and her to come to Decara and be welcomed as friends, in every terrestrial language that ever was.

All this was condensed to the message and given to him.

He in turn gave it to her.

She in turn decided to accept.

But not before divesting the ship, divorcing it in two. Since there were only two members of the crew logically one would stay and one would go.

Equally logical it would be suicide to simply walk upon an alien planet alone.

So, they took one half of the vessel to journey below while the other would remain in orbit, monitoring them. Should they die, either one or both, then the mirror in orbit would relay this information to Command and either provide instructions to leave forever or return to take back their remains.

It all depended on whether their remains would aid a potential enemy at a future time.

When all arrangements were made the jagged blade of the ship sheared in two, one half splintering north and the other

remaining in the sky, now utterly empty.

Waiting.

Waiting without hope for them to survive.

They then departed to the strange planet below.

Decara was a nation of jungles despite it being in the north. One could see swathes of malachite-coloured trees swimming the air, grasping fingerless hands groping at the invisible pull of the unseen land.

The coordinates given were for a small city near the heart of this endless greenery.

Arisa and Amalric braced themselves as the gravity of Malisfelt took hold and where before there was a thrust of weightlessness now mass regained their bones.

The city was like a circular labyrinth. This she saw as she lowered.

She expected gold, without quite knowing why.

She imagined a city of gold, roads paved silver, but though the city was bright it was not gold. Of that she was certain.

The labyrinth of streets spread from a central spire and the vessel prepared to descend lower and lower, finally reaching the tower and its twelve sloping spokes, each razor-thin as if it were an arrow overburdened by violence.

Their ship landed upon the top of this tower and having already ascertained the air to be safe departed, Arisa going first. The book was still in her hand.

One would be forgiven for thinking this was some error on her part, that this was some sure sign of misplaced priorities. The reality was much simpler.

An infinite number of things could go wrong.

They had after all scanned the twin-planet and observed all manner of life upon it. They had seen cities to the south, observed blunt leviathans swimming the skies, and even noticed

in the far waters things too terrible to explain rationally, by a human mind.

And now they were here in one nation out of many, meeting beings who might be as humanly cruel as they or wickedly wise as animals and despite their observations having no more clue about their natures than a man would watching a shark devour a doe.

Since anything could go wrong and having read so many stories of aliens and humans meeting and all the ways their meetings ended in tragedy Marcien decided the best she could do was focus on something else. It would be the same as listening to a song while a needle stole pieces of one's blood. If the pain is suffused in something else one can endure it.

Stepping from their blade of a ship Arisa felt the book securely in her hand.

Before them stood a being at first too human to be real.

"Welcome," the voice said, the body attached to it.

"We are the representatives of the planet Earth," Amalric said, reciting words which had become a sad refrain, since till now they had never been used, "and come in friendship and faith."

"We are the children of Decara," the figure said, features gradually sloping toward something utterly human and then veering away at the last second, revealing a form Arisa almost could not bear to see.

The face melted in her glances. Replacing human eyes were two red fires and the mouth elongated downward revealing rows of utterly needlelike teeth. Hands became claws pigeon blood red, skin resembling hands by their shade.

"We are welcome to make your acquaintance," Strahman said, extending a hand.

The child of Decara declined this gesture, instead raising her hand upward, palm toward her, indicating the razor-sharp fingertips as the reason why.

"Come. There is much to discuss."

And without another word the alien turned and walked toward a door suspended in errant nothingness. The door hung just beyond the flat boundary of the tower and for a moment Arisa was afraid this was some sort of suicide.

Then the tower itself extended outward to the moon-rounded door and she beckoned the humans to follow.

Eventually, they did.

"You have questions," their guide stated when the three of them were settled in a dining room.

"A few."

This was Arisa who spoke.

"You may ask whatever you wish. We are friends here."

"How do you know our language?"

"We don't," the alien said. She picked up a small animal from the table and ate it. The animal resembled a cricket but was infinitely larger, its legs and head removed and placed to the side.

"Could you explain that?" Amalric asked.

"I do not know your language nor do you know mine."

"Is this telepathy then?" Arisa asked.

"Quite."

"You're in our minds. So that . . . form . . . that you slip into and out of is your *real* form. Your woman's face is . . ."

"An illusion. Yes. Obviously. How are you enjoying the meal?"

"Not hungry," Amalric said. "You'll forgive me but eating strange food on an alien planet given by a total stranger is . . . foolish. For all we know you could be hellbent on invading Earth."

Their guide laughed. It was an uncomfortable sound and Arisa was aware this was how they sounded without their thoughts to mask them. It was a low guttural howl like a hyena

would make but lower, deeper, as if vines bled into the throat and these were making the sounds harder to create and yet harsher when they came.

"What would be the point of that?" she asked.

"Conquest is a common theme in life," Amalric said.

"And yet it is you who have come here. I could ask you if you intended to conquer our grounds."

"Conquest of another planet is impossible," Arisa said. "At least by us. If you can read our thoughts, you know Earth has no resources to fight on another planet. We have colonies on Mars and Europa but to launch a fleet here, what would be the point?"

"Exactly." And here their guide almost snapped her fingers in mockery of a human gesture. "What would be the point? Oh, I know what you know, and in your literature, this scene has played out too many times. Two sides struggling for control, each claiming superiority over the other, long treatises on the parallels of our situation and those of others, of Tenochtitlan or those jewelled cities of Peru. But the ocean that separates us from you is not merely crossed in an afternoon, is it? And if you scanned us, you know our resources are equal to yours, not greater than. You will not invest more in violence to get less than violence provides. It would not be logical."

"Quite so. Might I ask then what you require of us?"

"Require Arisa?" their guide asked.

"You have responded to us. We are here. If we are indeed friends what is the basis of our friendship? We are not the same species. If you are telepathic, you have a decided advantage over us. Our planet is a foreign one to you. Yours a foreign one to us. What would give us communion with you?"

"Death," their guide said simply. "Death gives us communion one to another."

She rose as the walls shifted and bloomed colours. Before the dining room was simply a slightly dull space of burnished

bronze but now it was illuminated with emeralds and sapphires and streaks of night.

"You have asked the basis of our friendship. If you follow, I will show you."

The three left.

2) Crawling across the sun, slithering on my belly

They were led outside to one of the roads. All was silent, none occupied the street.

"What do you see?" their guide asked.

"A street. What is it, really?"

"An artery, Arisa, it is an artery."

The road buckled under their weight or seemed to then right itself. They walked on, passing empty houses all neatly arranged in their rows.

"Behold the city of Shiraiz. Behold the beast of Shiraiz."

The streets shifted to reveal they were indeed standing in a corridor, blood shifting by, imperceptibly felt by them. The walls of the streets were now transparent and the sound of a heart beating its eternal tattoo was heard.

"We are inside a creature?" Amalric asked.

"We are. I am but a portion of it. The last portion. I am the last shred of a dying thought. You asked the reason for our communion and here it is. To share this death with you."

"To kill us then?"

"No Arisa. As I said we are your friends. This creature, myself, it is one of the last of Decara's children. It is also one of the oldest. It was born when the Void Sea first ascended across the waters and made this world itself. It has observed and lived longer than your entire species. It is older than your Moon. *I* am older than your Moon. And being so old I know when the time of death is come.

"I will tell you the history of this city that is myself. I will tell you of the children of Decara and as I do, I will take from your memories, not to hoard, merely to touch, to feel. And I will bridge my memories to you. But only one. Only you Arisa."

"I am not welcomed?" Amalric asked.

"I know your thoughts. You do not wish to *be* welcomed in this. She does."

"True," he conceded.

"Why would you do this?" she asked.

"When you are old enough you see patterns in things. I have seen leviathans swim in skies the colour of agate and have listened to the Void Sea as it dreamed. You are here. After you will come others. After them others still. You are worried and you bring small pieces of your world with you, and your life. In time they will go, those other children of Malisfelt, and they will bring with them pieces of our world, pieces of their lives.

"I see two paths ahead for all save myself, one ending with the destruction of you, the other ending with the changing of you, and all others, save *myself*.

"I would choose the path I can accept."

"And which path is that?"

Here the guide extended her hand.

"Take my hand and see."

"Just to be on the safe side," Strahman said, "I will have my gun at the ready. As touching as this is . . ."

"I know," their guide said, "you would not play this scene any other way. Do you accept?"

"I do."

She touched the alien hand. But whether Arisa reached out or the guide did it was quite impossible to say.

The jungle bled backward in her glances.

Decara returned to a rocky expanse and the Void Sea

shifted backward into the stars, stumbling back like a drunken mire thrown by an indifferent hand. But the city remained.

Arisa saw the beast as it was.

It was an insect or a spider mired into an insect. Many limbs extended outward and the tower was now seen as the head of some mantid god.

It was born from an egg and now was crossing the expanse, time moving forward finally. Void Sea crashing, continents shifting, life beginning. A few leviathans were seen, great rounded masses of them bending under the weight of the sky like a bowstring suddenly taunt, suddenly freed.

Life was beginning here, life of a smaller kind.

There were names, Ulsaires and Mairoptis, but these would come later. Now there came earlier drafts. Arisa could hear them, see those earlier nations making war and peace, lusting and refraining, sloth-borne and violence-seeking.

Malisfelt had indeed an old history.

Those first nations changed, perished, resurrected. Decara died and was reborn, the mantid god stooping to observe these microscopic creatures invading its body.

These parasites stole into the skin and made dominion of its blood, and in the alchemy of that first age, the mantid god did not allow them to change it but instead allowed it to change them.

It made them wiser. It turned them from animal to thought and slowly in its veins, cities began to tumour and take shape. All this the dying showed the woman.

In time these creatures became mimics.

The worms grew legs because those of Mairoptis grew legs and where the stony armour draped the bodies of a far southern land, slowly they too developed armour.

Where star-flowers would take thought they too took thoughts until the offspring of the child of Decara possessed all that each of the nations had possessed.

"Why then did you fall?" Arisa asked.

"Time cannot be pierced," the answer was given.

And while this was happening Arisa felt her own life slowly slipping into oblivion.

Her home on Main Street was autopsied.

She felt her mother's smile cut into small pieces and observed.

The library was pierced open, A. A. Kemon becoming the scalpel of notice. Hardly surprising. A. A. Kemon was herself. Arisa was simply the mask she had worn. Or was it Kemon's now?

Suddenly there flashed into being her life, or rather both of them.

In one of course she was Kemon, the dour and depressed muse whose pen had sprung death into the machinery of words. Her failed love had formed one caldazel sequence, the first line mirroring the last while her hate occupied an ovillejo which had broken down each curse to its constituent.

Hardly surprising.

Then there was Arisa who had seen planets of ice and fire but none of this equalled that first flight, feeling the ground slip away, leaving only the words behind.

Except . . .

Now she was standing in the city of these mimics. The cyyytresk were born here though she lacked the word for them even now.

They slid from door to door, beetles whose metallic runes seemed in those first ages to mean an end of things. By now however, those runes were long since gone off of them, leaving but a blank remnant behind.

"My message in a bottle," the guide said. "After I am gone, they will remain."

The people here found the insects attractive, drawn to their

beauty which shifted so easily into lust. The beetles themselves changed, becoming more like those peoples in that city of flesh, and all the time Arisa felt her guide sipping at the flight she had first borne on.

Both of them knew how it would end.

Creatures like the guide emerged in time.

They ran violence through veins, slaughtering the others. The child of Decara was having a nightmare and this nightmare became the mother of them.

But the nightmare only happened because the beast had grown too old, left jaggedly in one spot listening to itself and all those about, knowing it had rooted and would not ever be brought back to motion again.

The slaughter ended quickly, the last image Arisa caught was a stony throne at time's end, wormlike creatures sitting upon those thrones watching their past expire, feeling themselves fade in the violence cast.

"A dying dream," her guide explained, without saying if the dream was hers or theirs.

Then darkness then.

Without realizing it she had witnessed the birth and death of an entire civilization glimpsed in a moment. Dwarfed by the enormity of this she had no words.

It would be easy to imagine either that this knowledge would affect her or that it wouldn't, that she would come to the waking world slithering at the grief of watching dead bodies devoured, knowing the nightmare preserved the dead, leaving a final dirge to last forever or she would seem normal as before as if the holocaust of this passing had meant nothing to her.

Darkness then.

She awoke to see her guide and Amalric there, the streets became streets again.

"I have given all this to you," the guide said. "And I have

taken something from you."

"When will you die?"

"Soon. Too soon . . ."

The guide slouched forward to be caught by the man, even though minutes before he mentioned casually how easy he'd find in killing her.

Such was the nature of him.

Laying her down upon the street Arisa put her hand in that of the dying, even as her hand was cut.

"A gift," the guide said calmly. Then died.

The city began to burn and melt away.

They watched it.

Tears came then, softly slow, as Arisa saw the home of a family dismantled whose names she could not pronounce and yet knew deeper than one's blood.

The child of Decara perished without a sound.

The jungle slowly crept closer and the two realized it was only the weight of the city which had kept it back.

A terrible image struck the woman then, of the jungle blistering forward till it drowned them, of them having to walk the labyrinth of thorns each day bristling through the undergrowth which would grow its briars behind them, piercing and wounding them with every step they took, leaving no trace they had ever walked this way before.

Shaken, this last image of death added to the others, the two hurried to their ship and left.

In the wake of the dead city, it stirred.

Out of the dying dream, it stirred.

The first image was of a star ascending into the sky, mingling with a second star so like the first.

This image was caught and embedded behind the eye.

In the distance, the Void Sea was heard dreaming.

In the country behind her eyes, something stirred.

Now she was no longer *it*. Identity clung to her. She reached out a hand realizing it was a hand and moved the fingers slowly, slowly . . .

A name clung to her then.

Her feet. She had feet.

Out of the womb of the dead city, she began to walk, going toward a place whose name began with U, or was it M?

Either one, or both perhaps in time.

A name clung to her then.

She heard a song. A funeral dirge. One of the last children of Decara was singing for her sister but in time, a day at most or less she would perish too. And she was not so old as to have seen the birth pangs of Malisflet. That knowledge was lost, perhaps forever.

Idly she picked up some leaves and a few fossils from the grass and began to shape them.

There was a name, an important name.

Her own.

She caught a glimpse of herself ahead of her. She looked like some pale soldier, the skin a shade of pearl. How did she know the colour of a pearl?

Such a creature did not exist upon Malisfelt.

Examining herself the name grew stronger.

Kymon. Kamon. Kwemon.

Kemon.

Yes. That was the name.

She felt that there in the country behind her eyes was something important. Some task. The name was part of it.

Idly she began to sculpt herself. She took pieces of the jungle and sloped them along this pale skin then carefully made the mouth larger, ever so slightly, and then began to play with the letters of her name, changing them to something unrecognizable.

K could be V. M could be G. To a maker of things anything could be turned into anything else.

Finally, a line caught wickedly in her throat and seeing the mask she had fashioned for herself of this new body spoke it, to nobody in particular.

"To create is to destroy something as beautifully as you can."

Imagining this pale form now behind her, her silent companion, Vygharnax began the long trek west. She knew of a great ocean and a planet alien and familiar to her. She knew also in time others of this foreign place would come and she would have to make all things ready for them.

Just as on the other side, another stranger was coming, slowly making all things ready for those children of the Void Sea and Decara who had waited till her final moments to finish her masterpiece.

Epilogue

There came the day when a woman strode the streets of a city in Mairoptis looking for her consort.

She was born on Earth. Her parents were born on Earth. But she had come here to feel the heat of a foreign sun and one day when winter plagued the planet, she would never see again she saw the one she was looking for.

And her counterpart saw her.

There was the ancient struggle, each fiber of her being spent in this act of creation-murder but finally, the blade struck beneath the ribs of her enemy-lover and thus ended the battle.

Our woman here had the same hues riddle across her face as the tlylamir she fought and though born of Earth humanity had sloughed off her human shape and wore this new skin instead.

She desired only to be tlylamir and now in all respects, she was.

A tlylamir watched from the *Red Dragonfly Café*, observing the duel without taking part in it. A waiter came, pert and at attention, and bowed to the patron.

"Yes?" the tlylamir asked.

A cup of coffee was provided, and the waiter explaining a woman from another table had offered this gift.

Later she would come over, later still they would make love, later still she would grow pregnant but the most important word in all their love affair came not from either of them but the waiter whose own origins the tlylamir was not yet certain of.

The waiter said this.

"Sir?"

And the tlylamir glanced up at this title, an utterly foreign word never said until the current generation.

"Yes," the tlylamir replied. *He* replied. And as the pair of duellists exited the scene his eyes followed them and the woman rose from her table, went over to him, and smiled.

He smiled back.

As for his skin, it remained whatever shade he desired. The language of his skin had dissolved away for now, leaving only the smile and the words behind.

With but a flicker of his consciousness he could change again, those mosaics of scorpions in his blood changing him.

But not today and not for a good long time.

"Hello," she said, her own smile broadening.

His too did likewise and they left the café shortly after that.